The Wall of Partition

Florence L. Barclay

"Ignore letter. Wedding took place to-day"

Drawn by F. H. Townsend

(See Page 57)

THE WALL OF PARTITION

BY

FLORENCE L. BARCLAY

AUTHOR OF

THE ROSARY, ETC.

FRONTISPIECE BY

F. H. TOWNSEND

GROSSET & DUNLAP

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FLORENCE L. BARCLAY

BY FLORENCE L. BARCLAY

The Rosary
The Mistress of Shenstone
Through the Postern Gate
The Upas Tree
The Following of the Star
The Broken Halo
The Wall of Partition
My Heart's Right There

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The Wall of Partition

CHAPTER I

AFTER TEN YEARS

A FOG hung over London, on the afternoon of the 12th of December.

This was both right and seasonable within a fortnight of Christmas Day.

Passengers by the Channel boat had crossed in brilliant sunshine. Though the sea ran high, the sky was blue, and the great sea-horses tossed back white manes of glistening foam, as they rushed to meet the advancing steamer. Breaking against her sides, they covered the few travellers who attempted to tramp the decks, with briny spray; then, diving beneath the vessel's bows, lifted her high; but, rapidly receding, dropped her again into the trough of waters, as she pounded and ploughed her way toward Folkestone.

The sense of an old-fashioned Christmas was in the air, as the boat-express rushed through Kent. Passengers who felt equal to the effort of polishing the clouded window-panes, looked out upon crisp white frost over the bare hop-gardens, with here and there, in passing, a bright gleam of holly-berries in scarlet cluster against green frosty leaves.

English boys and girls, returning for the holidays from foreign boarding-schools, made peep-holes with their knitted gloves upon the misty windows, and smiled rather wanly at the holly-berries, and at the little Kentish churches nestling among orchards and farmhouses. The Channel had been "very beastly"; but this really looked like Christmas coming; and home was near at last. They pocketed their damp woolly gloves, and kept the peep-holes open with the window-strap.

Christmas was coming! London, braced and nerved for the final mighty rush of Christmas shoppers, dealt undismayed with the wholly seasonable fog; particularly as, on this 12th of December, at three in the afternoon, it merely hung high over all things, a lurid yellow ceiling, roofing the town, through which the sun unexpectedly appeared—a round, red, rapidly-setting ball.

The lamps of London were all lighted. The

shops shone, gay and brilliant. The hurrying crowds could manage very well without the sun, provided the heavy orange canopy above them did not suddenly fall lower, enveloping all things in dense darkness; hushing the busy roar of the traffic to a dismayed rumble, shortly to be followed by a groping silence.

The boat-train was due at Charing Cross. The long benches for registered luggage were cleared and ready. Custom-house officials waited behind them, or walked round, rapidly chalking numbers at intervals.

The express was signalled. A small army of porters suddenly appeared from nowhere, walked briskly far forward, and ranged themselves, prompt and alert, along the edge of the platform.

Friends of the passengers, who had come to meet the train, hurried further up the platform, and stood behind the waiting porters.

Then, with a rush of steam, out of the fog, which hung more thickly over the river, loomed the great engine, swiftly approaching; and the boat-train, gliding in, drew level with the expectant crowd.

As it came to a standstill, the door of the foremost compartment of the front carriage swung open, and a tall traveller sprang out.

Turning instantly on his heel, he stepped clear of the crowd, and walked down the empty platform toward the centre of the terminus.

His hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his ulster, he appeared to have no small luggage with him; in fact, but for the travelling rug across his shoulder, and the deep bronze which betokened, unmistakably, recent exposure to Eastern sun, his whole appearance was so casual, so unlike the hurried eagerness of a long-distance traveller, that he might very well have been strolling down the platform, after a ten minutes' run to town on a suburban train.

As a matter of fact, it was ten years since this tall traveller had seen a yellow fog, or heard the distant rumble which is London, and music in the ears of the true Londoner. No other city in the world can equal the deep trombone hum of London's traffic. The tall traveller had sampled many cities during his ten years of exile; he had heard the rattle of Paris, the crack of Florence, the whirl of New York, the rush of Chicago, and the weird hue and cry of Eastern towns. He had traversed every continent, had lived in many lands. And now, as he walked down the platform at Charing Cross, sniffing with keen enjoyment the peculiar busy smell of a London railway station, he

hoped, with an Englishman's instinctive concealment of emotion, that chance onlookers could see no signs of the deep stir it caused within him, to find himself surrounded by the well-remembered sights and sounds.

He was not expecting anybody to meet him. It was ten years since "welcome" had meant aught to him, save memories. Yet—toward him up the empty platform a little lady came, with flying feet.

She was short, and plump, and matronly, muffled in brown furs, which added to the soft cosiness of her appearance. Bright, eager eyes looked out through golden *pince-nez*. On her comfortable bosom reposed a huge bunch of violets, which rose and fell, spasmodically, as she ran, panting.

Within calling distance of the tall traveller, she spread wide her arms and, running still, cried: "Oh, my dearest boy! Welcome home! Ah, what it means to have you back! Welcome, my darling boy!"

In another moment the tall traveller expected to find himself encircled by those outstretched arms, and pressed against the violets.

He was endeavouring to catch at a suitable remark to make under such agreeable yet unforeseen circumstances, when it dawned upon him that

the bright eyes were looking beyond, rather than at, him. Glancing over his shoulder he saw a very small, very pale schoolboy, coming down the platform behind him, obviously arriving from a foreign school, and still feeling the effects of the "utter beastliness" of the Channel.

The tall traveller moved to one side.

The little lady swept past him, with a tinkle of bangles and a delicious fragrance of violets.

In another moment the tired, seasick little schoolboy was clasped in her embrace, kissed, questioned, welcomed, and kissed again. He yielded to the comfort of it. The other fellows were not there to see. It was so very cheering, after the long, lonely journey, to feel her arms about him, the fur he knew so well beneath his cheek, the scent of violets all around. He forgot the miseries of the Channel, and all the drawbacks of the wintry journey from Lausanne. Though still on the platform at Charing Cross station, the little English schoolboy had suddenly reached home.

The tall traveller smiled, and walked on.

"Welcome, my dearest boy! Ah, what it means to have you back!"

How absurd to have imagined, even for one instant, that such words as these could have been intended for himself! Why, there was nobody to

whom it meant anything whatsoever that, after ten long years abroad, he had come back!

He made his way to the railway bookstall. It struck him as larger and more complete than the bookstalls he remembered. He saw a satisfactory pile of his own books, in attractive readable editions, one for every year of his absence, for he was a rapid writer, and had had plenty of good material. His own name met him in large letters on a placard:

LATEST WORK

BY

RODNEY STEELE

"THE FLIGHT OF THE BOOMERANG."

2/- NET.

He took up a copy of *The Flight of the Boomerang*. It chanced to be the first bound copy he had seen. He had mailed his final proof by a shorter route, before starting homeward. He turned the pages, glancing quickly through it.

The young man in charge of the bookstall, prompt and vigilant, was instantly at his elbow.

"Capital book, sir. Rodney Steele's latest. Just out."

Steele looked at the youth—a gleam of amusement in his eyes. This was the first remark ad-

dressed to him in England. Was it his welcome home?

"Is it selling well?" he asked.

"All Mr. Steele's books sell well here, sir. You see, the public seems to like 'em for railway journeys. Amusing, plenty of adventure, lots of local colour, a little mild love-interest thrown in; no problems, nothing much to think about, and cocksure of a happy ending. That's what the travelling public wants."

"I see. And are these the ingredients which go to the making of all his books?"

"Much the same, sir. But plenty of variety in the setting. Mr. Steele is a great traveller. He sends home a story for every country to which he goes. Here's *The Butterfly Bride*, that's Japan; *Prince of Pigtails*, China. *Among Purple Tassels* is a tale of the west of America; I believe the title refers to the great fields of Indian corn. *The Desert Sentinel*, is Egypt. About the only country he hasn't done is India. Perhaps that's to come."

Rodney Steele frowned as he laid down *The Flight of the Boomerang*.

"They sound rather rotten," he said, abruptly.

The young man's keen face expressed disappointment.

"Well, I don't say they're *literature*, sir." Rodney smiled, as he heard this familiar catchword of the baffled critic. "And they might not be to *your* taste. But they're racy and readable, and full of local colour, and—as I say—that's what the travelling public likes."

He turned to straighten the pile, gave the advertisement-card even greater prominence, and incidentally sold the very copy Rodney Steele had handled, to a customer who hurried up, eagerly demanding it.

There was triumph in his eye, as he turned back to the tall traveller.

But Steele appeared to have forgotten *The Flight of the Boomerang*. He had taken up a six-shilling novel, strikingly bound in black with heavy gold lettering. The card displayed above it, announced: "The book of the season. A new novel by a new writer."

Rodney Steele looked at the title: *The Great Divide*, by Max Romer.

"What is this?" he said.

Again the young salesman was all enthusiasm.

"Ah, sir, that's the book for you, if you've not seen it already! Our boss says it's worth all Mr. Steele's stories put together. It's the book of the season. Everybody's reading it, and talking of

it, too, which amounts to a lot more. . . . Yes, madam? *The Great Divide?* Here you are! Six shillings. Thank you. . . . You see? That's the way it goes on all day. And full price they pay, to get it the moment they want it. . . . *The Great Divide?* I thought so, sir. Here you are! Thank you."

"Who is Max Romer?" asked Rodney Steele, slowly.

"Can't say, sir," replied the youth. "I believe it's a *nom-de-plume*, and I have heard it's a lady; but I doubt that."

"What are the—ingredients?"

The young salesman hesitated. Then: "Love," he said simply. "Love, and life."

"Love?" queried Rodney Steele. "I thought you told me these other books all had a love-interest?"

"Well, yes," said the youth. "May be, a love-interest. But this is—the Real Thing."

The tall traveller laughed. "All right," he said, "I'll have the Real Thing."

He slipped the book into the pocket of his ulster, and handed the young salesman a sovereign.

"Keep the change, my boy," he said. "I have taken up a pound's worth of your time, and

you have given me more than a pound's worth of information. And now tell me, honestly. Which do you really, yourself, prefer? Max Romer's book, or Rodney Steele's ?"

The youth coloured, then answered, with an obvious effort: "Fact is, sir, I've not read *The Great Divide;* I've only heard it talked about. But I've read all Mr. Steele's, except *The Boomerang;* and, what's more, I've got 'em all at home." Then, bracing himself, with true British pluck and honesty, he looked the tall traveller bravely in the face. "Fact is, sir, Mr. Steele's my favourite author."

"Thank you for telling me, my boy," said Rodney Steele. He took up a copy of his latest book, wrote something on the fly-leaf, and handed it to the youth. "Put that in your library," he said. "Wait a bit. Here are the two shillings. We won't take it out of the change. I owe you more than that. You have given me my welcome home."

Then he turned, and walked back to claim his luggage, his rug over his shoulder, his left hand in his pocket; on his lean, brown face a whimsical smile; for, in his right-hand pocket, was Max Romer's famous novel, worth all Rodney Steele's put together—so said "our boss," and so, probably, said the world.

But the lad at the bookstall remained faithful to his "favourite author."

There are always compensations, thank the Lord!

CHAPTER II

NO WELCOME HOME

WHEN Steele reached the Customs benches the barrier was already down, passengers were crowding round, identifying their luggage, and loudly declaring that they had nothing to declare.

He found himself, for a moment, close to the plump little lady with the violets.

In the appreciative atmosphere of home, the small schoolboy had completely recovered from his sea-sickness, and had lost all recollection of desolation and loneliness. He had forgotten the "utter beastliness" of the Channel. Mentally he was beginning to strut.

"We had a jolly good tossin', coming over," Steele heard him say to his mother. "Most of the women and girls had to stay below."

She was wrestling with keys, and trying to peep under the arms of tall people in front. Yet she turned, with love in her eyes, to say: "It is a great thing to be a good sailor, Bobby dear."

"You bet!" said Bobby, airily. Already he saw himself, through his proud little mother's eyes, tramping the deck with the other men. He elbowed his way through the crowd. "Come on, Mater," he said. "There's our porter. Just you follow me."

The flustered violets pressed after him. Rodney Steele caught a whiff of their crushed fragrance.

He was reminded of the motto at the top of the slip on which he occasionally received press cuttings:

"O wad some power the giftie gi'e us,
To see oursel's as others see us!"

When you feel yourself to be a grovelling worm, there is untold consolation in the certainty that at least one pair of eyes sees you a prancing unicorn! Steele knew he was misapplying Burns's famous lines, yet he enjoyed the misapplication.

There had once been a time when he was—not a fabulous hero, certainly—but just an honourable man in a tight place; yet the eyes he most trusted, had seen him—a worm.

That kind of experience is apt to prove a mere man's undoing.

Steele found his luggage, and said to the porter:

"Can we put it on a hansom, or must I have a four-wheeler?"

"A taxi will take it, sir," replied the porter; and Steele realised how long he had been away from London.

"49 Regent House, Regent's Park," he said to the driver. "Flats at the farther end of Harley Street; a big new building. But go through the parks, if the fog will allow. I want to see Buckingham Palace. Drive slowly, my man. Every yard is of interest to me."

He looked out, eagerly, as the taxi glided into the busy Strand, crossed Trafalgar Square, passed beneath the archway, and up the broad drive to Buckingham Palace.

Mysterious through the gloom, he saw the nation's fine memorial to a deathless memory. The gush of green waters, the golden figure at the summit, needed sunlight for their better seeing. But clear through the orange darkness, gleamed the white marble majesty of England's Great Queen.

Rodney Steele lifted his hand in reverent salute as he passed.

He had left England when that national loss and sorrow had been still fresh in the hearts of all. Now, in this hour of return, it seemed to him as if it were but yesterday that he had heard the roll

of the drums coming along Hyde Park, where thousands of stricken subjects waited in mournful silence while the little coffin of the Great Queen passed. How small it had seemed, to hold so great a queen; to represent, to tens of thousands of watching eyes, so vast a loss.

"'Lest we forget!'" quoted Rodney Steele, as he looked at the majestic marble figure, throned outside the palace, above the rushing waters. "Yet — could we, who really remember, ever forget?"

At Hyde Park Corner the fog hung lower; so the driver, thinking it safer to go where lights were brightest, turned down Piccadilly, up Bond Street, and across Oxford Street.

Shops and thoroughfares were brilliantly lighted. To Steele's keen glance of interest everything seemed to have advanced the full ten years—to be ten times brighter, ten times busier, ten times more crowded than he remembered. Then his taxi ran into Wimpole Street, and, after passing the new post-office, he found himself suddenly back among the things which change not.

He looked out at No. 50, with the old thrill of interest. There, high up on the wall, was the little medallion, recording the fact that in this house lived, from 1838 to 1846, Elizabeth Barrett

Browning, poetess. There were the steps up which Robert Browning so often passed, the front door which opened so constantly to admit him, during those two years of tender, romantic courtship. It must have been anxious work sometimes, reaching that quiet study, two flights up. Occasional awkward moments occurred, when unexpected visitors were encountered on the stairs. But, once safely within the sanctum where she waited, what a certainty of welcome!

Welcome! Steele seemed pursued by that word —he, who had returned, at last, to where no welcome waited. Again he scented the violets and heard the happy little mother's voice: "Welcome, my dearest boy! Ah, what it means to have you back!"

How extraordinarily crazy he had been to imagine, even for a moment, that those open arms, that rush of cosy softness up the platform, had been toward himself. He had even begun to consider what he would say, when he found himself embraced! Why do we have these moments of mental aberration, in which, jumping dreamlike to a false conclusion, we suddenly conceive the wildest happenings as about to occur, in the very midst of the utter commonplace of every day? What could be more dreamlike and absurd than

that a charming little woman, whom he did not know, in brown furs and gold *pince-nez*, should fly along the platform, crying: "Welcome, my dearest boy!" to him—to him? Yet—for just one moment—before he looked over his shoulder, and saw the small, pallid schoolboy——

Bah! there is always a "pallid schoolboy" in the background of such dreams, if common sense will but turn in time and glance over the shoulder. Life's traveller would rarely be overwhelmed by the rush of romance, had he but the sense to turn and look behind him.

So thought Rodney Steele, even as he passed the house where was gradually and delicately evolved the most perfect romance in our literature. Many a pallid spectre might have stood behind those poet lovers, had they faltered and looked back, instead of going bravely forward, strong in that perfect love which casteth out fear.

Perfect love? Perfect trust? Good God! Is there such a thing, in this suspicious, censorious world, as perfect trust? And can any love worthy of the name exist, where trust is not? He had been—no fabulous hero—but just an honourable man in a tight place, and the girl he wholly loved and trusted had turned on him, within a week of the day which was to make her altogether his,

and had said: "The least you can do, Rodney Steele, is to go out of my sight, and never attempt to speak to me again."

He had gone—ten years ago; and he had not spoken to her since.

"Welcome home, my dearest boy! Ah, what it means to have you back!"

The taxi skidded in crossing the Marylebone Road, and narrowly missed colliding with a motor-bus; which, regardless of fog and of sticky roads, was pursuing the usual headlong career of the London motor-buses.

The skid, the shouts, the narrow shave, roused and braced the man to whom danger of any kind was as the breath of life.

He leaned forward, enjoying the fury of the bus driver, and the official frown of a policeman.

Then the taxi passed through iron gates and drew up at one of the entrances of the handsome stone buildings, facing the upper end of Wimpole Street, in which was the flat, placed entirely at his disposal by his friend and cousin, Billy Cathcart.

As Steele's taxi, entering by one gate, drew up opposite the entrance bearing the numbers 42 to 55, another taxi, entering by the other gate, drew up at the same entrance, the two coming to a standstill within a few inches of each other.

The hall-porter, alert and watchful, ran down the steps to see to the luggage; and, as Steele alighted and paid his driver, a man sprang from the other taxi, flung a suit-case to the porter, and stood on the pavement fumbling with a handful of loose change.

Instantly a loud tattoo was beaten on a window above.

Both men looked up.

Steele knew which windows on the second floor were those of Billy's flat, having long before received an elaborately marked photograph of the building, which, for want of other pictures, he had put up on the wall of his log-hut. He was therefore quite familiar with the front of Regent House, and easily identified Billy's windows. The rooms were lighted; but the blinds were down.

The blinds were up, in the windows of the adjoining flat on the right; but the rooms were in total darkness.

On the left, however, the blinds were up, the rooms brilliantly lighted, and, eagerly pressed against the window-pane, Steele saw three children's faces. Behind the curly heads, her hands on either side of the window-pane above them, appeared the tall, graceful figure of a woman.

Three pairs of little hands were beating the energetic tattoo upon the glass.

The other traveller waved his hand, with a gay gesture, and paid his driver; then, turning to the hall-porter, said: "Run us up, at once, will you, Maloney? You can come back for the luggage."

"All right, sir," said Maloney. "Just give me time to carry it inside."

The travellers crossed the hall and entered the lift together. The porter quickly followed, clanged the gate to, and they mounted to the second floor.

The hall doors, belonging to the two flats, faced one another across a small stone landing.

Number 49 was closed; but the door of the opposite flat stood wide open. From it came the happy sound of children's voices.

As the gate of the lift swung open, Steele stood back to let the other man go first.

Following immediately, he could not fail to see what happened. There was a scamper of little feet; but, swiftly before them, came the sweep of velvet and lace. The woman's arms were around the traveller in the doorway. Steele saw the gladness in her uplifted face.

"Welcome, my dearest, welcome!" he heard her

say. "These ten days have seemed ten years to me! Ah, it is good to have you back!"

Then she drew him within, and shut the door.

Steele stood alone on the stone landing, a closed door on either side of him.

What a fuss other people's wives and mothers were making with their welcomes on this particular afternoon. It made a sensible, unromantic bachelor feel quite shy! And with the Real Thing in his pocket, if they could but have known it! A safer place, perhaps, for the Real Thing, than in the heart.

He smiled his rather whimsical smile, and rang the bell of No. 49.

The door was opened, promptly, and there stood Sergeant Jake—Jake in private clothes, trying to look an old family servant; Jake, striving to appear a sort of respectable cross between a butler and a valet; yet still, notwithstanding all his efforts, every inch a trooper. At sight of the man who had helped him carry Billy to safe cover at Spion Kop, Jake's heels came smartly together; the chest which owned a row of medals, and the proudest reward England can give for valour, unconsciously expanded, and Jake's right hand was lifted in salute. His left arm had remained in South Africa, the price he had paid for the life of his young captain.

"Why, Jake! This is first-rate," said Rodney Steele. "I did not know I should find an old comrade here."

And he stepped into the cosy hall of Billy's flat.

CHAPTER III

"TO LORD AND LADY HILARY—A SON"

AN hour later, Steele lay back in a deep armchair in the library, enjoying a pipe and the absolute quiet; the sense of being, at last, at home; an unlooked-for experience, so near a great London thoroughfare, and in rooms he had never before entered.

Jake had removed the tea-things, and left a copy of *The Times* on the table at his elbow.

Twice Steele had put out his hand for the paper, then withdrawn it, preferring to think his own thoughts in peace, undisturbed by the intrusion of print. He had lost the habit of a daily paper, and took to it reluctantly when he found it once more within reach.

He was enjoying to the full the curious sensation of his first experience of a London flat. He knew he had entered by a front door, used by other inhabitants of this portion of the great building; he had seen the common staircase; the lift ascend-

ing to the many floors. Yet when the door of No. 49 was closed, when he stood in the hall where a bright fire burned, illumining the fine old prints upon the walls; when he walked down the long corridor to his bedroom, or looked into the spacious dining-room opening out of the hall; or, better still, found himself in Billy's delightful library, with thick curtains drawn, the noise of the thoroughfare below, a mere hum in the distance, he could fancy himself in a large country house, miles away from any other dwelling.

It seemed almost impossible to believe that unknown people were just above and below him; that through this wall on his left, somebody else was probably having tea; that on the other side of the dining-room wall, the fellow who had received such a whirlwind of welcome, sat with the beautiful woman, and the three little curly heads. It seemed curious to be so isolated, and yet so surrounded.

Billy was due in a few minutes. He had telephoned that he was motoring up, but had been delayed by fog in the suburbs.

The telephone stood in the hall. The bell had whirred sharply, twice during the last half-hour. Jake had answered it each time, and nothing further had happened; so, apparently, the mes-

sages had not been for Steele. Besides, who should ring him up? Nobody knew of his return, save Billy and his publishers.

He had a strange sense of being in the world of London life, and yet not of it. Would he be able to gather up the threads of outside, present-day interests?

He laid down his pipe, put out his hand for the third time, and took up the paper.

For a minute or two he glanced at it in desultory fashion, his mind scarcely troubling to grasp that which his eye perceived.

Then a name arrested his wandering thoughts. He was galvanised into instant attention.

He did not move a muscle, as he read; but his face, notwithstanding its calm strength, grew ashen beneath the tan.

"At Simla, on November the 26th, to Lord and Lady Hilary—a son."

Rodney Steele laid down the paper.

During ten long years he had schooled himself to the realisation of the fact that, so soon after they had parted, the girl he loved, the girl he had won, the girl who had so nearly been altogether his, had given herself—while he still walked the earth—to another man.

At first he had expected such a paragraph as

this; had tortured himself by watching for it. But the years went by, and it did not appear; and, from time to time, he heard to a certainty that at least she had not borne children to that other man.

Yet now—"To Lord and Lady Hilary—a son."

He took up his pipe. It had gone out.

He filled it, mechanically; lighted it, and smoked on steadily.

"To Lord and Lady Hilary—a son."

Once he and she had walked together down a Surrey lane.

Their love was very new as yet, and full of wonder.

They climbed a stile, and passed into a cowslip field.

Some children she knew, were picking cowslips.

A rosy baby boy caught at her white skirt as she passed.

She stooped, picked him up in her strong young arms, and swung him high above her head, smiling up into his merry little face; then lowered him gently, and held him close, so that he nestled softly to her, his chubby hand against her neck.

Then she turned, a perfect picture in the summer sunlight, and looking at Steele, with tender

loving eyes, she said: "Oh, Roddie, I do so love a baby boy!"

And suddenly he had known what it would mean to see her with a little son of his, in her sweet arms.

He laid down his pipe.

He could smell the cowslips still.

"To Lord and Lady Hilary—a son."

A latchkey rattled in the lock of the hall door.

The hall door banged.

Rodney Steele took up his pipe, rose, and stood, very tall and straight, upon the hearthrug, his eyes fixed expectant on the library door.

The door burst open, and Billy bounded in.

CHAPTER IV

BILLY ATTEMPTS DIPLOMACY

BILLY, fresh and youthful as ever; full of gay exuberance.

"Hullo, old chap!" he said, as they clasped hands, a world of glad welcome in his boyish face, a ring of genuine gladness in his voice.

"Well, Billy," said Rodney Steele, "you see, I have taken you at your word. Here I am installed in your flat, and already feeling pretty well at home—a pleasant feeling, that, after ten years of wandering."

"First-rate!" said Billy, heartily. "You can't think how jolly it is for me to know you are here—and here for as long as you choose to stay. We are bound to be at the Manor for Christmas and the New Year, and well into January. The flat would be standing empty, if you were not in it. Do you like it, Rod?"

"It is quite the last thing in spaciousness and comfort, Billy. In my ignorance I had pictured

a flat as a place in which there was barely room to turn round. You can imagine my amazement when I walked in here. I hardly know myself in such magnificent surroundings."

"I am glad you like it," said Billy. "I know Jake and his wife will make you comfortable. They run the flat for us. It gives Jake a very suitable billet. He was lucky in finding such an excellent and capable little wife. She is altogether devoted to him, and, for his sake, to me. She was a housekeeper before she married Jake, so she cooks to perfection, and manages everything, Jake included. Her favourite remark is: 'Providence, thanks be, has given me hands for two!' She certainly supplements Jake's lost arm with an extra amount of energy and handiness. I know I am not allowed to mention your share in that day's work, old man, but I can never forget what I owe to you and to Jake. Since I came into the property, I often say to myself, as I canter across the park, or tramp the jolly old woods: 'If it weren't for Jake, all I should own now would be a bare six feet of earth under the veldt in the Transvaal.' So I can't ever let him be a loser by what he sacrificed for me."

"There are worse losses in life than an arm, old boy," said Steele. "Jake got the V.C. And

he seems as handy now with one arm, as most men are with two. With a wife to make much of him, and with this comfortable billet, no doubt he feels more than compensated."

"All the same, I can never forget what I owe him," said Billy. He sat forward in his chair, looking into the fire, and not at his friend. "And my wife feels as I do," said Billy.

There was an indescribable tone of shy pride in the way Billy said "my wife."

Rodney Steele looked at him, keenly.

Billy's fresh young face was flushed in the firelight. He looked so much younger than he actually was.

Steele marked the flush, with inward amusement. This had to be talked of between them. Last time they had met, Billy had joined him in the Rockies, bringing out a hopelessly broken heart, because Lady Ingleby had married Jim Airth. It was Billy's faithful devotion which had helped to bring them together; yet he had bolted from England before the wedding; and Steele had been the recipient of poor Billy's heart-broken and expansive confidences.

Steele had felt himself somewhat of a brute for giving no confidence in return. But his trouble, was too deep a wound to find solace in

words; his was not a nature which could either take, or give, comfort by self-pity or by self-revelation.

And here was Billy happily married, and flushing in the firelight at the mere mention of his wife; whilst he—Steele—was still lonely and self-contained; faithful to a memory which held but little of sweetness and much of pain.

"So you have done it, Billy-boy," he said. "You young scamp! Do you expect me to congratulate you?"

Then Billy burst forth.

"Wait until you have seen her, Rod; then you'll know! I can't imagine why she took me. She might have had anybody. Lots of other chaps were after her. Yet she took me! *Me!* Do you remember what an ass I was out in the Rockies? Luckily nobody knows of that but you. I fancied I was badly hit; but now I know——"

"Hold hard, Billy. You *were* badly hit. Don't be ashamed of it now. The lady was worth it. Be true to the past, old boy, however much you glory in the present."

"Ah, but I didn't know the Real Thing then," explained Billy. "You have to get married, Rod, to know the Real Thing." He leaned

forward eagerly, looking into the stern, quiet face, opposite. "It is so very—so very unbelievable, when the most adorable person in the world chooses *you* before all other men; likes you best, trusts you altogether, and keeps nothing back. One minute you feel too proud and bucked for words; and the next you feel such an utter beast, because you don't feel worthy to—to——"

"Tie her shoe-strings," suggested Steele. "I see. How long have you been married, Billy?"

"Four months yesterday, old man. I took her to Scotland, to a ripping moor. I loved to see her walking in the heather. She used to wear——"

"Hold hard, Billy! I don't understand women's garments. Descriptions will be wasted upon me. I suppose the lady is tall and graceful, and trod the heather in queenly fashion, yet as if she walked on air. Tall women always do, when men are in love with them, no matter what they weigh. 'Like dew on the gowan lying, is the fa' o' her fairy feet.' I have no doubt Annie Laurie weighed twelve stone. Well, happy man! may a mere mortal know the lady's name?"

"Valeria," said Billy; and he said it so tenderly and reverently, that the gay banter was checked

on Steele's lips, the mockery passed from his eyes. "She was Lady Valeria Beaucourt before she married me. Her father died last year, and her brother came into the title. She is the eldest of four sisters. They had to let the old place, and live at the Dower House with their mother."

"I am glad you are happy, old chap," said Steele. "My sincerest congratulations. I wish you lasting joy; and to her, also. I think the Lady Valeria knew a good man and true, even when she found him at her feet; and had the sense to say: 'I needs must love the highest—even when I see it in this lowly posture.'"

"Oh, rot!" said Billy. "I'm not half good enough for her. But I do thank God that I've known good women all my life—such women as Jane Dalmain and Myra Airth—and knowing them kept me all right for the time when I should meet Valeria. But, Rod—those friendships are nothing compared to the Real Thing. I can't explain. It is so wonderful to be so trusted—never to be kept outside. To be allowed——"

"Hold hard, Billy. You always were inclined to be a bit too expansive. Remember, I'm a rank outsider. Don't cast too many pearls. You might regret it, or—I might start trampling. Granted, you find the marriage state perfection

So much the better, having had the temerity to enter it. I am content to remain a bachelor. Let it rest at that. We could not all have the good fortune to win the Lady Valeria. Have a cigarette, Billy?"

Billy struck a match, and lighted his cigarette with elaborate care. His flow of conversation had been suddenly checked. He blew pensive smoke-rings in silence for a few minutes; then said, suddenly: "Rodney, don't you want news of Madge?"

Steele's face hardened.

"When I want news of your sister, Billy, I shall ask for it. I am a guest under your roof, solely because I can trust you not to speak of her unless I do so first."

"Rodney, old man, there is something you ought to know about Madge."

"I know it," said Steele. "So kindly say no more."

Billy threw away the end of his cigarette, and lighted another.

"I never knew a chap so deucedly true to his name," he said. "You steel yourself against all feeling and all emotion."

"When I require sympathy, pity, or information, I will ask for it, Billy. I have not kept out

of England for ten years, in order to have an old story raked up directly I return. Whatever news I require, I find in the papers. I took care to make sure your sister was in India, before I arranged to come home. No! Not another word, or I must be off, bag and baggage. Billy—I mean it. Do you take that in? . . . All right. Now let us talk of something else. Are you thinking of standing for the county? Will Lady Valeria try her hand at canvassing? Did your uncle leave the place in good order? I remember it always pleased the old boy to know you would stand in his shoes some day."

Billy Cathcart tried to respond to his cousin's mood, and talk of generalities; but his mind was full of another subject, and the conversation became strained and disjointed. Billy was a person who could not easily give his mind to other things, when it was possessed by one idea.

He fidgeted, and looked at the clock.

He had come to Steele charged with a delicate and an important mission. He felt himself inadequate to fulfil it. Steele had a most perplexing way of holding people's minds, in conversation. One could not say a thing to him, however important that he should hear it, if he did not choose to have it said—people found

themselves forgetting to mention the things he did not wish to hear.

In his vexation and perplexity, Billy looked round the room for inspiration. And there, on the table, he saw a copy of *The Great Divide*.

"Hullo!" he said. "So you've got Max Romer's book. What do you think of it?"

"I bought it only this afternoon at the bookstall at Charing Cross Station. They told me everybody is reading it, and that it is worth all mine put together. Also that it contains the Real Thing—in obvious capitals. Have you read it, Billy?"

"Of course I have. I don't often read a novel, but Valeria made me read *The Great Divide*. She sat me down to it and allowed no skipping. She kept asking me where I was. Don't you know how awful it is when somebody who knows the book perfectly, sits in the room while you are reading, and asks at regular intervals: 'Where are you *now?*' You simply daren't let your mind wander. And if you happen to have done a little skipping, when you cheerfully say where you are, they say: 'Why, you *can't* be there *yet!*' and put you through your paces as to what went before. I gave in at once, and read every line of *The Great Divide*, to please my wife."

"Why was she so keen that you should read it?"

"She wanted to be able to discuss it. Valeria loves discussing. I'm not much good at an argument, and I usually see a thing from Valeria's point of view when she has explained it. But I could not even agree with her until I had read the book, could I? I believe I could pass an exam. in it now. Valeria is very thorough."

"Poor Billy! Were you bored by *The Great Divide?*"

"No. To tell you the honest truth, I wasn't. I daresay I should have skipped the middle, if my wife would have let me; but I should certainly have looked at the end, to see how the book finished. It—it gripped me."

Steele smiled. "Is that an expression of Lady Valeria's, Billy?"

"Yes," said Billy, simply. "It gripped Valeria."

"I thought so. Now, look here, Billy. All novels worth reading, should be read twice—first rapidly, for the story and general effect; then carefully, as a study, psychological and artistic. Now, I have heaps of work to get through, and not much time for novel reading. Suppose you tell me, in a few words, the plot of this book of which everybody is talking. It will please your

wife that you should have been able to pass it on—with her impressions and your own."

"Why, of course I will," said Billy. "I told you I could pass an exam. in it, if necessary."

"Well? Start with the title. What is 'The Great Divide'? "

CHAPTER V

"THE GREAT DIVIDE"

BILLY got up and stood on the hearthrug.

Rodney Steele, his face in the shadow, lay back in his chair, watching Billy.

"The Great Divide," began Billy, "is a point on the big watershed of the North American continent. It is where the waters part in the Rockies. It is marked by a rustic arch spanning a stream, under which the waters divide into two little brooks which, though they have a common origin, have curiously different fates. A cupful of water thrown down under the arch goes in two directions — part reaching the Pacific by the great western rivers, and part flowing into the Atlantic by way of the Hudson Bay. So, you see, though they begin together, a whole vast continent eventually divides them. On the arch, which spans the streams at the spot where they part, is inscribed in huge letters: 'The Great Divide.'"

"Very interesting," said Steele, "and quite correct. I have stood beneath that arch. But this is geography, old boy. It is not romance."

"Well, you asked about the title," explained Billy. "It is told in the introduction."

"I see. Did Lady Valeria make you read the preface?"

"She read it *to* me," said Billy.

"Ah, I see. Got you well started. Now go ahead with the story."

"It begins," said Billy, "with a man and a girl who are engaged."

"Really? Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Nothing very new there. As old as the hills. I suppose the serpent turns up in the third or fourth chapter."

"Yes, the serpent turns up, right enough. But, wait a bit, Rodney. I wish Valeria was here to explain. It is all very well to say the man and the girl were engaged; but—well, you see, it is very wonderful love-making. It grips people when they read it. All the men are in love with the girl, and all the women are in love with the man. That's why they talk about it. While I was reading it, I felt as if the girl was Valeria, all the time; and the things which happened put me through a perfect hell."

"And did Lady Valeria feel as if the man was you?"

"Oh, no, she couldn't very well do that," said Billy, modestly. "He was a clever, dark, artistic sort of chap. His name was Valentine."

"Hopeless kind of name for a hero," remarked Rodney Steele. "It makes you think at once of a guardsman, a nursemaid, and the 14th of February."

"Well, so I thought, at first," admitted Billy; "and I said so, to my wife. But Valeria pointed out that I might as well say Mont Blanc reminded me of eggshells, because vulgar people sometimes picnic there. The name Valentine, according to Valeria, means 'strong and powerful.' Anyway it seems the only possible name, before you get half way through the book. He was generally called 'Val'; and, by a curious coincidence, I sometimes call Valeria, 'Val.'"

"Very curious. Get on with the story, Billy. I can't say I am gripped, as yet."

"Well, they were engaged," said Billy, in a patient, hopeless voice. "It isn't my fault if that doesn't grip you. They were awfully happy; and reading about it, makes you happy, too. Her people had not been very keen for her to marry Val, because an extremely rich individual with

a title was after her. But Katherine—did I tell you her name was Katherine?—Katherine was not the sort of girl who could be bullied. So she and Val stood up to the family; and the family had to lump it. They were both pretty young. Katherine was just twenty, and Val was twenty-seven. They believed in each other tremendously, and talked out, together, all about the years before they had met. There seemed to be nothing to hide."

"Well, they had hardly had time for much in the way of experience," said Steele. "Was there anything to hide?"

"You'll hear in a minute," said Billy. "A year before they met, Val had had a bad hunting accident, pitched bang on his head, taking a nasty fence, and had had cerebral hæmorrhage as the result. He was taken to a nursing-home kept by two sisters—the one, a nice motherly old thing, who ran the house; the other, younger—but a good bit older than Val—very charming and clever; a trained nurse.

"He was in this home, for six weeks. They pulled him through all right, though he put himself back by working at the manuscript of a book he was writing. The doctors found this out, and took it away, and then he began to mend;

but it made him pretty queer for some months after—queerer than he knew at the time. He told Katherine all about it, and how good these women had been to him.

"Well, a few days before the wedding, he walked in one evening, and found the handsome nurse having the deuce of a scene with Katherine. A bundle of letters lay on the table between them. They were love-letters—pretty strong ones, too—written by Val to the nurse. She had brought them to Katherine to prove that if Val married anybody, it ought to be she.

"When Val walked in, Katherine—very white and all that, you know—handed him the letter she was holding, and asked him whether or no he had written it.

"Val took up the letter; looked at it, in silence; then read it slowly through while the two women watched him.

"Then he said, yes, it was his writing.

"The nurse triumphantly offered Katherine a few more samples, but she refused to read them, saying the one she had already seen was more than enough. Then she turned upon Val, told him what she thought of him, and ordered him to leave the house, and never to speak to her again.

"Val seemed stunned. He had nothing to say.

He just took up the letters, and walked out. The nurse went with him.

"At the hotel where she was staying, Val ordered a private sitting-room. Then he sat down quietly, and read all the letters through.

"When he had finished he told her, what was the absolute fact: that he had not the faintest recollection of writing those letters; yet that he could not deny having written them, because he recognised his own handwriting. Most of them had been written while he was still convalescing in the nursing-home, the handsome nurse having gone off to take a case elsewhere.

"It made him realise that he had been much more off his chump than he had known at the time. As he read them, the letters vaguely reminded him that he had mixed up himself and the nurse, in his mind, with the story he had tried to write, after the accident.

"The horror of reading letters, written by his own hand, which he could not remember writing, gave Val a very bad time, as you may suppose. He felt he had lost everything. Katherine's love, his own confidence in himself—all seemed gone.

"Then the nurse tried to persuade him to marry her, said she had loved him all along, and would not have turned him down, as Katherine

had done, if he had written love-letters to fifty women.

"And then Val lets fly at her splendidly, and asks her what sort of love she calls it, which comes between a man and the pure, perfect happiness which was so nearly his. He says that if she had really loved him she would have sent him the letters, when she heard of his engagement, or seen him alone. But she has jolly well done for herself by going to Katherine. Then he shoves all the letters into the fire, and lets her rave.

"He returns to Katherine; but she is angry and humiliated, and won't see him. He writes an explanation; but her people return it, unopened.

"Then Val goes off to Africa to shoot big game.

"Out in camp, in a very wild and lonely place, he gets a letter from the friend who was to have been his best man, telling him that Katherine is engaged to the wealthy individual with a title; that her people have pulled it off; but that she does not look happy, and the friend is sure she is secretly pining for Val, and advises him to come back before it is too late.

"Val goes off, quite by himself, after getting that letter; and does some shooting and some thinking. All his passionate love for Katherine wakes up at the thought of her giving herself to

another man. He knows he could win her back, he feels what a fool he has been to go so far away. He never really meant to lose her. He makes up his mind to pocket his pride, and go back at once.

"Just as he has come to this decision—and there is a good deal of glow about it and a red sunset going on, though I don't exactly remember how the sunset came in—a runner comes out from the camp, with a cable message. Val tears it open. The friend who wrote the letter had sent it. It simply says: 'Ignore letter. Wedding took place to-day.' So Val knows he has pocketed his pride too late. He stands, with folded arms, upon a rock; the dead beasts he has shot are lying around; and the sunset fades.

"That's all," said Billy, sitting down.

Steele put out his hand in silence, took up the book, opened it, glanced at one or two passages; then laid it down again.

He seemed to find speech difficult.

At last he said: "And people are really discussing this story, Billy?"

"Indeed they are," said Billy.

"What do they find in it to discuss?"

"Well, one point is whether anybody could write a lot of letters and absolutely forget them, one by one, as soon as they were written."

"I should think cerebral hæmorrhage might very well account for that," remarked Steele.

"Then comes the question whether the girl would have handed him over to the other woman. Jane says she wouldn't, if she were really so fine a character as Max Romer has made Katherine. Valeria says she would; because pride is stronger than love. When Valeria says that, I am jolly glad there are no stray love-letters of mine going around! The Duchess says: girls are fools enough to do anything, when they are jealous; and that a nice sensible woman of thirty—that's the nurse, you know—would probably have made a more satisfactory wife than Katherine! So they go on talking."

"I see. Well, he did rather fall between two stools, didn't he? *The Great Divide* has not the conventional happy ending."

"It has a perfectly awful ending," said Billy, impressively. "I didn't half pile it up enough. You can't imagine the rotten sense of hopeless loneliness it leaves with you. And Valeria finds all sorts of meanings in the wild animals lying dead, and the red sunset dying out. And we leave Val, who seemed made for such glorious happiness, standing on a rock, his arms folded, despair in his eyes, absolutely alone."

"Who is Max Romer?" asked Steele, suddenly.

"Nobody seems to know," replied Billy. "I have an idea——"

The telephone-bell in the hall rang sharply. They heard Jake answer it.

"Ah, by the way, old man," said Billy, "I'm afraid you will find the telephone a bit of a bother. Fact is, they've just changed our number. 'Four nine four Mayfair,' was the number of the Metropolitan Emergency Hospital, until a month or two ago. For some reason or other, I have no notion why, the Hospital was given another number, and we were given 'four nine four Mayfair.' The new telephone book comes out in January; but meanwhile we are being constantly rung up by people wanting the Hospital. Jake always answers, and gives them the right number; but the bell going at all hours is a nuisance. I hope it won't annoy you."

"Not at all," said Steele. "It will amuse me. Perhaps you will hardly credit it, but I have not before lived in a house with a telephone. Of course I have often used them, in hotels and elsewhere, while travelling; but a telephone always at hand, is a novelty to me. I will undertake some of the answering for Jake."

"You'll soon be sick of it," said Billy. "And

look here, Rod! You'll soon be sick of being alone; at least, I hope you will. Won't you come down to us for Christmas? You'd like to see the old Manor House again; and my wife wants to know you. We would have quite a gay time. The Duchess has a big party at Overdene for the New Year; the Dalmains, the Airths, the Wests, the Brands—if he can get away—and half-a-dozen other old friends. You would like to meet them all again, and you would get no end of a welcome, Rod."

"Thank you, Billy. May I think it over and let you know? At present I am afraid I still feel rather a wild man of the woods. After ten years—it is difficult— Thanks old chap. I am not ungrateful."

Billy looked at the clock.

"Hullo!" he said. "Seven! And I promised my wife to be home to dinner at half-past eight. We shall have to speed. Good-bye, old man. Remember, the flat's your own, and all that's in it. But propose yourself to us as soon as you feel like it. . . . Whir! There goes the telephone! Now you can try your hand at answering. . . . No, Jake. I won't wait for the lift. Good-night."

And Billy ran down the stairs.

CHAPTER VI

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

BILLY found his chauffeur in the entrance, deep in conversation with Maloney. He ran to start the engine. Billy stopped him.

"I am not going just yet, Loder," he said. "I shall be back here in half an hour; then we shall have to do forty, and trust to luck. You can wait inside."

There was an air of mystery about Billy's movements. He walked off toward Langham Place; then doubled back, and ran up the steps into the entrance leading to the set of flats in Regent House, next to his own. He took the lift to the second floor. As he left it, a man stood waiting to go down.

"Hullo, Billy!" he said.

Billy turned, and saw Ronald Ingram.

"Hullo!" he said, hastily. "Have you been calling on my sister?"

"I have been trying to do so; but Lady Hilary is particularly engaged, and can see nobody."

Billy laughed. "She expects me," he said. "In fact, I am the particular engagement, arriving late."

"Lucky man!" called back Ronald Ingram, as the lift dropped out of sight.

Billy rang the bell of the door on the right.

"Her ladyship is in the drawing-room, sir," said the maid who opened the door.

Billy paused a minute at the drawing-room door, passed his hand nervously over his sleek head, and took a deep breath.

Then he went in, carefully closing the door behind him.

A soft golden radiance shone from the shaded lights. An Indian screen, drawn across the doorway, concealed most of the room. Billy came round it. His step made no sound on the thick velvet-pile of the carpet.

A tall woman, in an evening gown of soft black, sat in a low chair, near the fire.

"Hullo, Madge!" said Billy.

She turned quickly; rose, and came to meet him.

"Oh, Billy; he has arrived!"

"I know he has arrived, my dear," said Billy, in a stage whisper. "I come from spending an hour and a half with him, just on the other side of this wall. He sits there, now"—Billy made a

dramatic gesture toward the fire-place—"within a couple of yards of your chair; and, heaven help us, my good girl, he believes you to be in India!"

"Billy," said Lady Hilary, "I saw him drive up in a taxi. I had telephoned to Charing Cross to know when the boat-train was expected. I put out all the lights and waited in the window, partly concealed by the curtain. But the fog made everything so curiously dark above, though it was clear below, that I had little fear of being seen. Two taxis came up at the same moment, and two men alighted. But I knew Rodney, instantly. I could not mistake his broad, square shoulders, and the set of his head. I think someone must have been tapping on a window further along, for they both looked up, and the other man waved his hand. Just for one instant, Rodney looked straight up at this window. Oh, Billy-boy, I hadn't seen him for ten years, and all my heart went out in welcome!" She spread wide her arms in an impulsive gesture, expressing an abandonment of yearning. "I was there to welcome him; waiting, watching, loving, longing,—and he did not know it! Don't you think he must have known it, Billy?"

Billy sat down, giving a decisive hitch to each knee.

"Indeed, he doesn't know it, Madge. In fact, he told me he had taken care to make sure you were in India, before deciding at last to come home. I say, Madge! Don't you think you might sit down and talk to me in an ordinary manner? When you advance on me, with your arms spread like the sails of a windmill, you make me nervous, and I've already had a pretty stiff time on the other side of the wall, trying to work things round for you, with Rodney. Threatening to embrace me as a proxy, won't help matters. If you will compose yourself and sit down, I will try to tell you how the land lies."

Lady Hilary laughed, and sank into a chair opposite her brother's.

"Billy dear," she said, "I am foolish. You must make allowances. Remember all my long months of waiting for Rodney to come home. Remember that even now I am quite in the dark as to how things stand between us. Does he know?"

"He knows you are a widow," said Billy, bluntly. "I made sure of that, anyway."

"Did you tell him?"

"There was no need to tell him. He had seen it in the papers."

"Are you sure of that, Billy? He was in Aus-

tralia, this time last year, in a most out-of-the-way place in the Bush. And very little about Gerald's death appeared in the papers. It was hushed up, as much as possible. We only just avoided an inquest. You see, it was an over-dose of chloral, at the end. If it had not been for his position out there, the whole wretched story would have come out, and the skeleton I had kept under lock and key, during all those bitter years, would have stalked in the full light of day."

"Poor old Madge! I know you had the deuce of a time of it. I can't imagine how you kept up your spirits, and kept your good looks. You are a deal better looking now, than you were ten years ago."

Lady Hilary smiled and coloured, in swift pleasure. A compliment from a brother is always the most absolutely sincere of compliments, and usually totally unexpected. Lady Hilary's loveliness and exceeding charm had been often extolled, both in prose and poetry, and in deftly-turned phrase of whispered admiration. But Billy's crude "You are a deal better looking now than you were ten years ago," told her more than the most elaborate compliment.

"Thank you, dear," she said. "I had a talisman throughout the long years; but I should find

it difficult to make you understand what that talisman was, or how it worked. Now, Billy, tell me just what passed between you and Rodney; because it means so desperately much to me, that I can't risk any misunderstandings. I have often felt doubtful whether he knew I was free, because, Gerald's brother being out there, and stepping straight into Gerald's post as well as into the title, paragraphs in the papers mentioning Lord and Lady Hilary went on, exactly as if they applied to Gerald and me, whereas they really applied to my brother-in-law and his wife. And, by the way, I see in to-day's paper, they have a little son, born in Simla. I am glad. That means an heir. The other children are girls."

"I'll tell you just what passed," said Billy. "I asked him if he would like news of you. He said if he required it, he would ask for it. I took the bull by the horns, and said there was something he ought to know. He at once replied, that he knew it already; he had seen it in the papers. Then he grew very 'steely' about not letting me talk of you. He was a guest under my roof solely on condition that I didn't, and so forth. After which, when he had me properly muzzled, he announced that he had ascertained that you were safely in India, before he decided to come home. Now,

how could I, after that, tell him you had had the flat next door to mine, during the last six months, and were in all probability, at that very moment, toasting your toes at the fire, within three yards of where his Tragic Steeliness was sitting, petrifying your well-meaning brother into silence?"

"Billy dear, tell me just how he looks."

Billy passed his hand over his own fair head, in some perplexity.

"Descriptions are not my forte, Madge, as you know. Let me see. He is very big, and very lean. His hair is as thick and crisp as ever, but cropped closer than in the old days, and streaked with silver on the temples. His eyes are dark and keen, and still have that horrid trick of looking straight into you, when you talk; seeing what you are going to say next, and considering whether to let you say it or not."

"I thought he looked sunburnt."

"You thought right; a jolly old mahogany tan, you could see a mile off. But that always suited Steele. His thin, keen face can stand being the colour of a desert Arab's. He still shaves clean—very clean, and his jaw means business. But I don't want to frighten you, Madge. He is just the same good old sort to talk to; and his eyes and mouth soften a lot when he smiles."

Lady Hilary's eyes and lips softened into more than tenderness.

"I take a lot of frightening, Billy dear," she said. "Strength in a man, doesn't frighten me so much as weakness. And even if it did, it would be almost a relief to be frightened in that way."

"Madge, you never told me what it was Rodney did, which came between you."

"No, I never told you nor anyone, and I never shall. It would not have come between us had I been ten years older, with more experience of life, and of the ways of men. No girl of nineteen can love with the woman's love, which all men need; the love which is patient and understanding; which waits, and forgives. A year later, Billy, I was ten years older! Then I understood; and then I knew just how much I loved Rodney."

"My dear girl, wasn't that a bit hard on Gerald?"

"Gerald had all he cared to have, Billy. Gerald, in after years, had cause to bless my talisman, for it gave me patience, and it kept me beside him."

"I don't think Steele has had much of a talisman," said Billy. "He doesn't look like it. Somehow he reminds me of the fellow standing with folded arms lonely on the rock, dead beasts all around him, in the fading red sunset."

"Whom on earth are you talking about, Billy?"

"Valentine, in *The Great Divide*. Haven't you read it?"

"No; I have read no novels lately, excepting Rodney's."

"Valeria doesn't think much of Rodney's stories," said Billy. "They told him to-day, at the bookstall at Charing Cross, that *The Great Divide* was worth all his put together. They did not recognise him, of course. When he mentioned it, I didn't know what to say; because Valeria made exactly the same remark this morning."

Lady Hilary flushed, indignantly. "Oh, Billy, you don't mean to say you said nothing? Valeria is no judge of writing! All the delicate beauty of Rodney's wonderful descriptions, all the subtle humour and insight, the perfect presentment of the countries of which he writes, must have escaped her. How horribly discouraging to be greeted by such a remark, immediately on arrival."

"My dear girl he didn't mind a bit. He laughed when he told me, as if he rather liked it."

"People often laugh to hide a wound which has cut deeply. I wish somebody would dare to say it to me! What is this *Great Divide?*"

"A love story, and the Real Thing. You know Rodney can't write a love story."

"Billy, he has never cared to try. Cannot you

see that he writes of love as a man whom love has failed, would write? I find an infinitely sad tone of light mockery in his love scenes. He does not write of what you call the Real Thing, because he does not believe in it. He is disillusioned."

"Well, he'll find it in *The Great Divide*."

"Is he reading this book?"

"He bought a copy this afternoon in sheer glee at being told it was worth all his own, put together. He is quite keen on it. He made me tell him the whole story, and I jolly well did it, too. Valeria will be delighted. It was she who made me read it so carefully."

"Whose is it, did you say?"

"Max Romer's."

"Who is Max Romer?"

"Nobody knows. It may be a what d'you call it?"

"Pseudonym?"

"Yes. Some people think Max Romer is a woman."

"Is that likely?"

"Well, opinions differ. Some people say the strong parts are too strong to have been written by a woman; but other people say the tender parts are too tender to have been written by a man."

"Perhaps a husband and wife collaborated."

"I don't think so. Madge, shall I tell you a profound secret? I believe Valeria wrote *The Great Divide*."

"My dear Billy! What makes you think so?"

"Well, you see, she is so keen about it. She makes everybody read it. And she says she considers it the cleverest book she knows. All sorts of little things of that kind, make me think she wrote it herself."

Lady Hilary's eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Billy-boy," she said, "shall I tell you an even profounder secret? I believe you and Valeria wrote it in collaboration!"

"No, I assure you we didn't. On my honour," said Billy, quite seriously. "If Valeria did it, she did it entirely on her own."

"But, Billy dear, you don't write a full-length important novel, at odd moments, unknown to anybody"

"No, *I* don't," agreed Billy. "I certainly don't. But it is just the sort of thing Valeria might do."

"Well, if Rodney is reading it on his side of the wall," said Lady Hilary, "I may as well be reading it on mine. I shall send for a copy to-morrow. Now, Billy, what is to happen next?"

"Goodness only knows," said Billy. "I suppose you will run into one another in the street. Please remember, when you do, that he believes you to be in India."

"I shall take care nothing of that sort happens. I must watch him for a few days, and wait. Then, perhaps, I shall write, telling him that I am here, and ask him to come and see me. But I dare not hurry matters; I dare not risk making a mistake. Have you any idea how he will spend his days?"

"He said he had heaps of work to do, and seemed glad the flat was so quiet. It is, you know; except for the telephone nuisance."

"What is that?"

"They have changed our number and given us 494 Mayfair, which used to be the Metropolitan Emergency Hospital. The new telephone book isn't out yet, and apparently the Hospital still has 494 Mayfair on its writing-paper, so we are perpetually rung up by people asking for the matron, or urgently wanting to speak to Dr. Brown. Jake tackles them, and gives them the new number; but it means the bell going at all hours. However, Rodney seemed amused, and said he should like answering it himself. He apparently looks upon a telephone in the house, as

a new toy. He'll tire of it in twenty-four hours, and wish it at Jericho. I say, Madge, I must be off! We are supposed to dine at half-past eight, but I shall not be home until nearly nine. I didn't like leaving Valeria, even for these few hours. She told me something—something almost too wonderful to believe—the other day. I mustn't tell you what it is, because I promised to tell nobody. But, oh, I say, Madge! When I think of it, I hardly know whether I am on my head or my heels. I don't know how to take enough care of my wife. I am almost afraid to let her walk upstairs."

Lady Hilary's eyes were very soft and tender, yet a little wistful, as she looked at Billy's young, eager face. Would he ever grow up? What form of discipline would have to come his way, before Billy's heart would lose its simple faith, its boyish joy in love and life?

Lady Hilary rose, and laid her hand upon her brother's shoulder, as they stood together.

"Billy dear," she said, "don't tell me anything you have promised not to tell. But I am sure you need not be afraid to let Valeria walk upstairs. Under any circumstances, exercise is certainly good for her; and walking upstairs hurts nobody. My advice to you is: not to fuss

over your wife, Billy; and not to worry your dear old self, by unnecessary anxiety."

"You have had no experience of such things, Madge," said Billy, gravely.

"True, dear," said Lady Hilary, gently. "You must consult somebody who has. Can't you motor your wife to Overdene, and suggest her telling this secret—whatever it is—to Jane Dalmain or the Duchess? And persuade her to let them talk to you, Billy. Between them you'll get some good, sensible advice."

"Advice be hanged!" said Billy. "I'm in the seventh heaven of gladness and wonder. I, who don't feel worthy to tie her shoe-strings, to be the fa— Oh, I say! I nearly told you! You can't possibly know what I feel about it, Madge."

"Of course I can't, dear, if I do not know what it is. But I love you to be happy, Billy; and I am afraid I sometimes feel anxious about you, old boy; just as you feel anxious about Valeria. Now, I mustn't keep you. Give me a thought sometimes; and, if you hear anything of importance from Rodney, let me know. I shall just wait patiently. It will be easier to wait, now I have seen him; and now that I know him safely next door, with only a wall between. I wish we

could look through the wall, Billy, and see what he is doing at this moment.

* * * * *

This is what Rodney Steele was doing, at that moment.

When he had seen Billy run down the stairs; when Jake had closed the door; Steele went back to the library.

He sat motionless in the deep leather-covered armchair for a considerable time, wrapped in thought.

At last he took up *The Great Divide* and read portions of it; turning rapidly from passage to passage, as one finding his way, with ease, along accustomed paths.

Then he suddenly laughed aloud, and, throwing down the book, took from his breast-pocket a long envelope addressed to himself, which he had found awaiting him on his arrival. From this he drew another envelope addressed: "Max Romer, Esq.," and, opening it, pulled out a mass of press-cuttings.

He settled himself comfortably in his chair, adjusted the electric lamp at his elbow, and took up his pipe, saying to himself, as he filled and lighted it:

"Now let's see what the papers have to say about *The Great Divide*. The very worst the reviewers can do, could hardly be so bad as hearing the story told by Billy!"

CHAPTER VII

"ON BEHALF OF MAX ROMER"

ON the evening of the day after his arrival, Rodney Steele sat at work in the cosy little octagon hall of the flat. He sat there, in preference to the library, for several reasons.

Being the very centre of all things, it was absolutely quiet. The window opened on to an inner court. With the library and dining-room doors closed, the distant rumble of the traffic in the Marylebone Road could not be heard.

A screen was drawn across the outer door. The doors leading to bedrooms and to the domain of Mrs. Jake, were also closed and curtained off.

A bright fire burned in the open hearth. An easy chair, of most comfortable proportions, awaited him beside it, when his work should be finished.

A shaded lamp stood on the writing-table.

There was an extraordinary sense of being completely shut off from the rest of the world,

in this hall of Billy's flat. It combined the advantages of a hermit's cell, with every comfort of modern luxury. It lent itself admirably to the concentration required for proof-reading. Save for one thing, the quiet and seclusion were perfect. Yet that one thing supplied the primary reason for his desertion of the library. To the wall behind him was fixed the telephone. When that persistent little bell rang, he had but to push back his chair, cross the hall in two strides, and take down the receiver.

Rodney Steele had had twenty-four hours of the telephone; and, as Billy had foretold, he was beginning to have had enough.

At first it had amused him to engage in polite conversation with various agitated, anxious, or angry people requiring the Metropolitan Emergency Hospital, and growing perplexed or indignant when 494 Mayfair failed to produce either a doctor or a matron. But the novelty of this amusement soon wore off, and Steele began to make allowance for Jake's irritable formula: "If it's the bloomin' 'orspital you want——"

Even the interest of being called up by Billy, and of himself ringing up one or two old friends with whom he had not spoken for years, and the convenience of a lengthy conversation with his

publisher, hardly compensated for the incessant unnecessary calls, and consequent interruption.

Nevertheless, it was the telephone which was mainly responsible for the fact that he was established in the hall, during his second evening at the flat.

Jake had asked whether he and Mrs. Jake might go out for a couple of hours, when dinner was over. Steele found himself, therefore, left in sole charge, and preferred to sit where he could promptly seize the receiver, and put an instant stop to the maddening whir of the telephone-bell.

It went off energetically, just as he had really settled down to the proof of an article which must be read and dispatched without loss of time.

Proof-reading is, at best, nerve-straining work. Looking for the mistakes of others, is more trying than avoiding or correcting your own.

Steele sprang to the receiver.

"Hullo," said a man's voice. "Can I speak to Dr. Brown?"

"This is not the hospital. It is a private number."

"Aren't you 494 Mayfair?"

"Yes; but the number has been changed. If you want the hospital, you must ring up 4923 Central."

"What ?"

"I have given you the new number."

"I don't want a number, I tell you!" buzzed an angry voice. "I am through to 494 Mayfair, and I want Dr. Brown."

Steele rang off, and returned to his proof. He had barely found the place, when whir-r! went the bell, again!

Steele wrenched down the receiver. "Hullo?"

"Is this 494 Mayfair?" shouted the same man's voice. "I want to speak at once to Dr. Brown."

"What a fool you must be!" retorted Steele, angrily. "I have told you 494 Mayfair is a private address. Here, Exchange! Can't you turn this lunatic on to 4923 Central? I shan't answer again, if he rings up this number."

Steele went back to his work, feeling soothed and calmed. He hoped the man who wanted the hospital had heard himself called a lunatic. He hoped Dr. Brown would give him a bad time of it, when he at last got hold of him.

The hush of complete silence enveloped Steele once more. He worked quickly and well, during half an hour.

Then there was a sudden avalanche behind the screen, followed by a postman's knock at the door. Again the outer world had intruded upon Steele's privacy.

It was tiresome, yet impossible not to go and see what the avalanche had brought.

The wire letter-box contained three or four circulars for Billy, and a letter for himself; a delicately tinted envelope, so strongly redolent of essence of violets, that the scent reached him even before he took the letter from the box.

The address was in a woman's handwriting. From whom could it be? The fragrance of violets recalled to his sub-consciousness the little lady of Charing Cross; but his intelligence—not to be caught out again—dismissed her at once.

What woman, in the whole world, knew of his presence at 49 Regent House?

He had earned a few minutes of relaxation.

He sat down in the easy-chair, opened the envelope, and drew out a closely written sheet. One glance at the signature solved the mystery.

Of course! Who else could it be? Lady Valeria—his hostess, Billy's wife. What more natural than that she should write?

Bah! What scent!

Goodness! What flourishes!

"My dear Mr. Steele,—I rejoice to hear from Billy of your safe arrival.

"I trust you find all as it should be, at the flat.

I doubt whether the Jakes are very competent, but Billy is so set upon having them there. Personally, I should prefer a man with the usual number of limbs, and with previous experience as a butler. I trust you will excuse any deficiency.

"I write to endorse, most warmly, Billy's suggestion that you should come to us for Christmas. Your first Christmas in England, after so long an absence, must certainly not be spent in solitude. I am most anxious to make your acquaintance, and to tell you how much I have enjoyed your charming books. I hope you will soon give us another. I have done a little writing, myself; therefore you will understand that I am very interested in discussing style and technique."

Steele laughed as he leaned forward and kicked the fire into a blaze.

"The first thing for you to learn concerning technique and style, my dear Lady Valeria," he said, "is that you must not say 'very interested.'"

Then he went on with the letter.

"I now want a private word with you—I was going to say on *behalf* of Max Romer, but perhaps that would go too near to giving away secrets! So let me merely say: I am anxious to give you a word of explanation concerning *The Great Divide.*

"Billy came home last night quite elated over having told you the story. My dear Mr. Steele, surely I need hardly tell you, Billy is quite incapable of understanding such a book as *The Great Divide!* Still less is he competent to give an adequate résumé of the story. *The Great Divide* is *the* book of the year. It is a masterly study of love, of loss, and of loneliness. It shows the irreparability of the havoc wrought in two lives, by a false and foolish pride. It will do much to safeguard lovers against the 'little rift within the lute.'

"I fear my poor Billy's bungling version may put you off a careful reading of the book; and this—for a reason which I cannot explain as yet—would be a great disappointment to *me*. I want your opinion of Max Romer's work. To hear what *you* think of it—you, who are the author of so many quite delightful books—would mean much to *me!*

"Cordially yours,

"VALERIA CATHCART."

"Great Scott!" said Steele, as he laid down the letter; and there was an angry gleam in his eyes. Then they softened, suddenly. "Poor old Billy!" he said.

He got up at once, went to the table, swept his proof aside, and drew forward a sheet of writing-paper.

He wrote rapidly, without pause or hesitation; and, as he wrote, Billy might well have said that his jaw meant business.

"Dear Lady Valeria,—Thank you for so kindly supplementing Billy's invitation. My plans at present are uncertain; but Billy was good enough to say, yesterday, that the question of my visit to the Manor House might remain open until rather nearer the date.

"I am most comfortable here. It seems to me that there is everything, in Billy's flat, which the heart of man could desire. To a traveller accustomed to roughing it all over the world, it certainly appears the very acme of luxury.

"Jake is an old comrade of mine. It was a pleasure to find him here. As I happen to have witnessed the magnificent deed of bravery which gave Billy his life, and cost Jake his arm, I should prefer Jake as he is, even if he spilt soup down my back, and upset inkstands over my papers. These slight concessions on my part are, however, rendered unnecessary by the fact of Jake's extreme deftness with his remaining hand. Nobody could

require a more efficient butler, or a more careful valet.

"As to the interesting subject of *The Great Divide*, Max Romer is a fortunate man, in that he has secured the keen partisanship of so enthusiastic an admirer.

"At the same time, you will forgive me for saying that I think you considerably underrate Billy's powers as a raconteur. I glanced at the book last night and found that his version of the story, though necessarily short, and perhaps a trifle crude, had been remarkably accurate.

"I shall be pleased to discuss *The Great Divide* with you, at the first opportunity. It is undoubtedly the work of a man—and of a man who has drunk deeply of the cup of disappointment and disillusion.

"I thank you for your kind reference to my books.

"Believe me,

"Very truly yours,

"RODNEY STEELE."

Rodney closed the letter with a bang of his great fist, and drove home the stamp with another.

"There, my Lady Valeria," he said; "that should cook your goose! Good heavens! Poor

Billy! She got the 'masterly study of love, loss, and loneliness' out of a review. I read it last night. Also the 'little rift within the lute.' We shall have to make Lady Valeria's 'music mute,' if she is going to pipe this kind of jig for us to dance to! Well, I couldn't say more, without giving the show away; and that, I will never do—not even for Billy's sake. . . . So she writes on behalf of Max Romer! Well! My Lady Valeria has cheek, and no mistake."

He stepped outside, and rang up the lift.

"Post this letter at once, please," he said to the hall porter.

Then he went in again, banging the door behind him.

He picked up Lady Valeria's letter, replaced it in its envelope, and slipped it into his pocket-book. But the next minute he took it out again.

"That won't do," he said. "Too scented!"

He looked around for some safe repository for the scented missive. Then, suddenly, with a laugh of disgust, dropped it into the heart of the fire. "So perish all the king's enemies!" said Rodney Steele, as the paper curled and crumpled, was licked up by leaping flame, and fell into a little heap of charred ashes. Then he went back to his proof.

A distant clock was chiming the hour of ten.

As the last stroke sounded, Rodney found his place, and took up his pen to delete an unnecessary word.

At that moment the telephone-bell rang sharply. He dropped the pen with an exclamation of annoyance, walked over to the telephone, and took up the receiver.

CHAPTER VIII

A VOICE FROM THE VOID

"HULLO!" said Steele, sharply.

This time it was a woman's voice at the other end.

"Is this 494 Mayfair?"

"Yes."

"Can—can I speak to the Matron?"

"This is not the Metropolitan Emergency Hospital. You have the wrong number."

"Oh—I beg your pardon. It is the number in the book. I am so sorry to have troubled you."

Steele was mollified. A very polite lady was at the other end of the telephone; a decided improvement upon the lunatic who had refused to listen to the correct number, and had gone on clamouring for Dr. Brown.

"Never mind," he said, cordially. "I can give you the number you want. You must ask for 4923 Central."

"Thank you very much. I am *so* sorry to have disturbed you. . . . Good-night."

"Good-night," said Steele, and hung up the receiver.

Then complete silence fell; surrounding him, once more, with that curious sense of isolation from the outer world.

He tried to give his mind to his work; but still seemed to hear that gentle voice, saying: "I am *so* sorry to have disturbed you. . . . Good-night."

It was such a kind voice; there was almost a caress in its tones; a fulness of understanding and sympathy. It seemed to awaken an echo of a long ago past.

"I am so sorry to have disturbed you. . . . Good-night."

The distant clock chimed the quarter after ten.

Rodney Steele laid down his pen, put away his papers, lighted his pipe, and flung himself into the large armchair by the fire.

Then he began to think about the telephone.

What an extraordinary invention it was.

Here was he, in his utter loneliness; absorbed in his own work. Yet a woman's voice had expressed concern that he should have been disturbed, and had wished him good-night.

The sound and sense of it seemed still around him in the solitude of the silent flat.

"I am so sorry to have disturbed you. . . . Good-night."

How did she know she had disturbed him? Ah! He remembered the irritable brusqueness of his first "Hullo!"

He tried to recall the whole conversation. His own voice now seemed to him to have been brusque throughout, as compared with the gentle tones of the kind voice. Yet he remembered, with satisfaction, that he had said: "Never mind." One can hardly say "never mind" in a rough tone of annoyance.

Then they had wished each other good-night—he, and this woman with the kind voice, whom he would never see, never speak with again.

It was just a voice from the void; it had come into touch with him through a mistake, had expressed concern that he should have been disturbed, and had wished him good-night.

He was somewhat of a sentimental fool, to give it another thought. But why did it awaken such haunting echoes of a dead and gone past?

"Good-night . . . Good-night." And, in the soft darkness, Madge used to lift her lips to his.

"Good-night, my sweetheart . . . Good-night, my love, my own."

He could smell the scent of the new-mown hay, mingled with sweet-brier and eglantine in the old Manor garden.

"Good-night, my very own."

No! Another's! Another's! He must not dwell upon such memories, however sweet. Had he not put them away for good and all, when she gave herself to another man, while he—her first lover—still walked the same earth?

Away with such reveries! Why should this voice from the void so stir his heart—so wake the buried past?

Turning his mind resolutely to the present, he began to meditate again upon the subject of the telephone.

What an extraordinary invention, if one ceases to regard it as an everyday convenience of which constant use has cheapened the marvel, and dwells upon it as an abstract fact. That people, at various distances from one another, should be connected at a central office, and should then speak to each other as if they stood side by side. The kind voice had been at his very elbow—even closer. "I am so sorry to have disturbed you. . . . Good-night."

It was years since a woman's voice had gently bidden him good-night.

What a fool he had been to ring off. She might have said something more.

A great longing came over him to hear the kind voice again; and then he realised the absolute futility of such a desire. He could never know who she was, or from whence she had spoken. Just a voice from the void. He had no possible means of getting into touch with that kind voice again. She would have no cause to ring him up. He could not find out her number. She was as completely lost to him as any other of the four and a half million unknown voices by which he was surrounded in this great metropolis.

Yet, half an hour ago, he was standing with the receiver in his hand, and she was wishing him good-night.

Then, suddenly, Rodney Steele burst out laughing.

"Oh, you utter, sentimental fool!" he said. "Go to bed! Get the full benefit of the fact that a woman has wished you good-night—over the telephone! Go to bed, you silly ass! or it will be your turn next to ring up the Matron or Dr. Brown, to come and dose you with sal-volatile."

He stood up, and walked unsteadily to the door communicating with the servants' quarters.

As he opened it, he heard Jake and his wife talking quietly in the kitchen.

"Hullo, Jake!" he called. "So you're in. I shan't want anything else to-night. I'm off to bed."

"Right, sir," said Jake, appearing in the doorway.

Rodney went down the passage to his room, whistling gaily. Yet, as he walked and whistled, he still scented the new-mown hay. Its haunting fragrance seemed all around him, after he had switched off the light.

As he lay in the still darkness, he heard again the kind voice say: "I am so sorry to have disturbed you. . . . Good-night." . . . The honeysuckle swept his face; the sweet-brier bush was near. . . . No; it was the wild rose. He could see the little pink petals, like pale faces, in the dark. . . . Hush! It was Madge's voice now—not kind, not *merely* kind—but passionately tender. Her lovely face, white in the fragrant dusk, was lifted to his. "Good-night, sweetheart. . . . Good-night, my love, my own." . . .

Then Rodney slept.

And, with the wall between, she sat and rocked herself, with empty arms.

Yet she had heard his voice; hard at first, then growing more gentle.

She had heard him say: "Good-night."

After long weary years—after long lonely years—after long hungry years, Roddie and she had bidden each other good-night.

He was so near. He was all alone. Yet she rocked herself, with empty arms.

"Good-night, my love, good-night."

CHAPTER IX

SHUT OUT

RODNEY STEELE sat at breakfast enjoying—not Mrs. Jake's hot coffee and rolls, though they were of the best—but the wonderful London sunrise.

His horizon was formed by the chimney-stacks of the tall houses opposite, in Harley Street. Consequently the sun rose, for him, just before nine o'clock, on these December mornings.

Looking through the bare, wide-spreading branches of the great plane-trees, their little bunches of black balls hanging in clusters against the clear morning sky, he saw the chimney-pots stand out against a blaze of gorgeous crimson; then, in sudden golden glory, the sun appeared—a great, red ball, rising slowly from behind the stack of chimneys; mounting, round and fiery, into the dull, grey, wintry sky.

Each morning, when the fog allowed, this sunrise through the Harley Street chimneys took

place. Each afternoon, soon after three o'clock, the sun set beyond the stacks of Wimpole Street. Against the pale yellow of the sunset, stood out the quaint tower of Marylebone parish church—that church in which Robert Browning took to himself his "Lyric Love," and to which he made a romantic pilgrimage, each time he returned to London, and, kneeling, kissed the steps up which had passed her trembling feet on that eventful morning, when she fled from home to give herself into his strong safe-keeping. Truly it takes a great poet soul, to be fearlessly unashamed of sentiment.

Steele, who had put all such things out of his own life, keenly enjoyed romance in others.

He now left his eggs and bacon, went over to the bay window, and stood watching the weird effect of the sunrise.

It struck him as so typical of London life, that the horizon should be bounded by the dwellings of men. He had seen the sun rise out of the ocean, over the prairie, in the great expanse of eastern desert, where it rose majestic from the vast horizon of Nature. But here, humanity had built a limit; and here the main daily interest to the mind, was man.

As Rodney stood at the window, into the

hum of the continuous traffic below, broke the loud clang of a swiftly approaching bell.

A fire-engine dashed by; closely followed by another. The brass helmets of the firemen gleamed brightly in the sunlight.

At sound of the bell, the three children in the adjoining flat, rushed to their window. Steele saw again the curly heads he had seen on his arrival.

Next door, they were evidently also at breakfast.

The children watched the engines go by; then saw Steele, and smiled in merry friendliness through the double glass. He waved his napkin at them. They waved back with toast, and bread and butter. The mother appeared, glanced across at him with a look of amusement, and drove the children back to breakfast.

Steele went back to his lonely table, and poured himself out a second cup of the excellent coffee.

He felt friendly and sociable this morning. He had had an unusually restful night, and had awakened with a sense of peculiar vigour and well-being. A heavy weight seemed to have been lifted off him; he felt the gay gladness of youth; and experienced an unaccountable wish to do something to make somebody happy.

He wished he could take the three jolly little

kids from next door, out on a spree. Would it astonish their mother very much, if he crossed the landing outside, rang the bell of No. 48, and asked leave to take them to the Zoo? He considered the question carefully, and came to the conclusion that it would be too unconventional for England.

He finished breakfast; then walked to the window and stood looking out.

One of the small boys appeared in the other window, saw Rodney, and rushed to call the other children. In a very short time, three bright little faces were smiling at him from the next bay.

Rodney took a penny from his pocket, and began deftly conjuring. He could hear faint echoes of the shouts of glee, when he apparently swallowed the penny, sneezed, and produced it from his nose.

There were great searchings for a penny with which to do likewise; but, fearing accidents, Rodney shook his head, dashed to the table, fetched a piece of bread, rolled it into little balls the size of marbles; held his left hand, palm downwards, level in front of him; placed a bread pellet on the back of his fingers; then, smartly striking the back of his left hand with his right, shot the pellet into his open mouth.

There was evidently a helter-skelter rush, to the next door breakfast table, for bread.

Back they came, rolling the little balls. Rodney continued bringing off, at intervals, neat shots straight into his mouth.

The children stood in an eager row, watching him, and trying to do the trick themselves. The boys went at it too wildly, in their excitement; but the little girl, a small maiden of six, quite unexpectedly, by the most astonishing fluke, shot her first pellet not only into her mouth, but straight down her throat.

She stood for a moment, with her mouth wide open, very round-eyed and astonished; then began to cry. Her brothers turned upon her, trying to see where the ball of bread had gone.

Rodney stood, helplessly watching the result of his well-meant endeavours to amuse.

A nurse arrived, promptly shook the little boys —that being a preliminary suited to all circumstances—supplied the little girl with a handkerchief; and then proceeded to make inquiries.

The boys indicated Rodney, standing tall and anxious in his window. Even the little girl lifted a wet finger and pointed.

The nurse glared at him; then, with a rapid movement pulled down the blind on that side,

shutting him out from any further view of the fiasco.

Rodney turned away, feeling himself a cause of disaster. He dismissed, with absolute finality, all idea of taking the next door family to the Zoo. Even if the mother could be induced to consent, he felt sure the task would be beyond him.

He went into the library, strolled to the window and looked out. The blind of the bay, in the flat on his left, was also down.

He felt shut out of all things. There was nothing left to him but to count the little balls, hanging in sooty clusters from the bare branches of the plane-trees.

This sense of isolation, suddenly reminded him of the kind voice of the evening before. What a curious episode that had been! Why had it so vividly, so forcibly, recalled the vanished past?

How much amused and astonished the good lady who had wished to speak to the Matron of the Metropolitan Emergency Hospital would be, could she know how strongly her voice had affected him.

A great desire to hear it again, awoke within him.

He dismissed it, with a sense of annoyance at

his own unaccountable lapse into absurd sentimentality; sat down steadily to work, and finished reading his proof.

Three times during the morning's work, through the closed library door, he heard the bell of the telephone. But he resolutely left it to Jake. People anxious to converse with the Matron or Dr. Brown, must do so, in future, without his assistance.

His proof finished, he took it out himself to post; then, having left word with Jake that he would not be in until dinner-time, he went for a long walk among his old favourite haunts.

The superficial side of London may change with changing years. The heart of the city is always the same. As Rodney walked, and verified each well-remembered place, he felt he was walking off ten long years of exile.

He returned to the flat at seven o'clock, tired and hungry, to find that at tea-time Lady Valeria had called with Billy, and had left many messages of regret at not having found him at home.

Lady Valeria had also left a strong scent of violets behind her. It recalled to Steele her letter, and he smiled rather grimly. His answer must have reached her that morning. She had probably seen his copy of *The Great Divide* lying

upon the library table. He felt a momentary anxiety about press-cuttings, then remembered that he had locked them into his dispatch box.

As he dressed for dinner, he wondered, idly, whether it was his reply to her letter which had produced so prompt a call from Lady Valeria. He was sorry to have missed Billy, but felt in no mood just then to make the acquaintance of the lady who had written to him on behalf of Max Romer.

CHAPTER X

THE BISHOP'S CONCORDANCE

AFTER dinner that evening, Steele sat smoking in the hall, as Jake passed through from the dining-room.

"I shall want nothing more to-night, Jake," he said. "You can go out if you like. Should the telephone ring, I will answer it. You need not come through."

"Right, sir," said Jake, and went to his own quarters.

As Steele spoke, he realised that he had tramped twenty miles that day in an effort to walk off the impression made upon him by the kind voice, and the inexplicable yearning which possessed him to hear that voice again.

He had a man's instinctive dislike of any sensation in himself for which he could not fully account, and which he found himself unable to control.

He had tried to walk it off, but had not succeeded.

Here he was, making sure of being in sole possession of the telephone, in the wild, vague hope that she would ring up again!

It was too absurd for words; and yet somehow he could not bring himself to believe that a thing which had impressed his own mind so strongly, had meant nothing to the other who had shared the experience.

Ever since that brief conversation took place he had felt as if some mental force, outside himself, was not allowing the matter to drop. Could that mental force be in any way connected with the mind of the unknown woman with whom he had spoken?

He could not work this evening. He felt comfortably tired and lazy. He sat, in the warm glow of the firelight, with his pipe, in the absolute silence of the little hall.

Memories of Madge possessed him.

Why was he calling her "Madge" again? For years he had schooled himself to think of her as "Lady Hilary."

Would *The Great Divide* reach Simla? He had seen it prominently displayed in every bookseller's he had passed that day. Would Madge read it? Would she recognise in it, notwithstanding his careful changing of most of the

actual circumstances, the tragedy of his life and hers?

"Whir-r-r," went the bell of the telephone.

In one bound Steele was out of his chair and had the receiver in his hand.

"Hullo! Yes? Yes? Hullo!"

"Is this 494 Mayfair?" inquired a man's voice.

"It is," said Steele.

"Can I speak to Dr. Brown?"

"No, you can't!" snapped Steele, and rang off.

This was final and conclusive.

He laughed.

Hang the telephone! Why should he have to explain their rotten change of numbers?

He went back to his chair, and brooded.

Presently the avalanche took place behind the screen. Mechanically he fetched the letters.

More reviews of *The Great Divide*, and a large cheque from his publishers.

He felt like putting the cheque into the fire.

Of what use was his great success to him? He had nobody with whom to share it.

He thought of his growing balance at the bank. It bored him to take the trouble to consider how to invest his money. Words he had heard

long ago, came into his mind: "He heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them."

Where had he heard those words? Who had so well expressed the case of a lonely man who makes money? Shakespeare, probably.

He mentally ran through the most likely plays.

Shylock? No; he had a daughter. "My daughter!—O my ducats!—O my daughter! Fled with a Christian? O my Christian ducats!—Justice! the law! My ducats and my daughter?" There were plenty of people to gather poor old Shylock's riches.

"He heapeth up riches—" Somehow he associated the words with attending his mother's funeral, years ago, in the little village church at home, as a most small and forlorn chief-mourner. But she certainly had not heaped up riches, poor lady!

Were they words of Bible wisdom?

He went into the library, and searched unsuccessfully for a Bible, among Billy's books. Apparently the flat did not contain such a thing.

He returned to his chair, and put the cheque into his pocket-book.

"He heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them."

Bother! He must find the quotation.

He rang the bell.

"Jake, can you lend me a Bible?"

Jake looked as if he feared Mr. Steele had suddenly been seized by mortal illness.

"I'll see, sir," he said, doubtfully.

In two minutes he returned, jubilant; in his hand a small, stout book, carefully covered in brown paper.

"Mrs. Jake, sir," he said, "is happy to oblige."

Steele waited until the door swung to; then he opened Mrs. Jake's Bible.

It had been presented at a village Sunday-school, many years before, to "Sarah Mimms—a prize for regular attendance, punctuality, and good conduct." The date went back forty years.

Rodney smiled as he read the inscription. He could see Mrs. Jake, as little Sarah Mimms, already round and rosy, trotting to Sunday-school regularly, arriving punctually, and behaving with the most exemplary correctness of conduct. He could see her, curtseying to the good rector, whose name figured on the fly-leaf as the donor of the book; and standing up, a little pattern of propriety, to say the Creed, the Catechism, and the Ten Commandments, in the vulgar tongue.

The Bible had been made the repository of many treasures, a fact which partly accounted

for its stoutness. It opened most readily at the twenty-third Psalm, where was a perforated card, mounted on faded mauve ribbon, bearing the injunction worked in mauve silk: "Read, Mark, Learn." It also opened with equal readiness at the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, where was another perforated marker, having "God is Love" worked on it, in pink silk. Pressed flowers, in various conditions of flat fadedness, lay between the leaves; also an unmounted photograph of Jake in uniform, a brave row of medals on his breast, a little cane beneath his arm, and a most photographic grin of acute discomfort upon his honest face. The marriage "lines" of Sarah Mimms and Alfred Jake, folded small, also dwelt for safety in the Bible, adding considerably to its bulk.

Steele began a fruitless search through the Book of Proverbs, for the passage he wanted. He found plenty of wisdom, and many home-truths; but not the quotation he had in mind.

Then he tried the Sermon on the Mount; but came no nearer the words for which he was searching, than the idea that treasure laid up on earth was liable to the corruption of moth and rust, and to the depredation of thieves.

He began to have serious thoughts of ringing

for Jake and saying: "Will you oblige me, my good fellow, by asking Mrs. Jake—otherwise Sarah Mimms, well known in Dinglevale, in the early 'seventies, as a pattern of propriety, punctuality, and perseverance—whether she has read, marked, and learned to sufficient purpose to be able to tell me whereabouts in her Bible I shall find the remark, which I believe I last heard at a funeral service: 'He heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them'?"

But, undoubtedly, Jake, with solemn face, would feel it his duty instantly to turn to the telephone, ring up 4923 Central, and ask to speak to the Matron or Dr. Brown.

No; a better way would be to procure a concordance.

He stepped out to the lift, and rang up the hall-porter.

"Maloney, you are a useful man. Can you find me a concordance?"

"What may that be, sir?"

"A book parsons use, when they write their sermons."

"The nearest we can do to that, sir, is a bishop's widow in the flat below."

"Excellent! Here is my card. Ring the bell of the bishop's widow in the flat below, hand in

my card, and ask if she will be good enough to lend me a concordance."

In five minutes Maloney returned, carrying a beautifully bound copy of *Young's Analytical Concordance.*

"Mrs. Bellamy's compliments, sir; and she has the greatest pleasure in sending it up."

"Thanks, Maloney. I knew you were a man of resource. Fancy being able to put your finger at once upon a bishop's widow! Now, wait here half a minute, and you shall take the book back. The late bishop's concordance in the flat all night, would be too great a responsibility. Suppose we caught fire!"

Standing at the table, Steele turned up "riches" and ran his finger down the page.

Ah! There it was! "*Heapeth up riches,*" Ps. xxxix. 6.

He returned the book to the hall-porter.

"Here you are, Maloney. My compliments and thanks to Mrs. Bellamy; and say I found at once the passage I wanted."

Steele closed the door, as Maloney and the concordance dropped down in the lift; settled into his chair, and took up Mrs. Jake's Bible. The whole thing was providing him with the mental diversion he needed.

CHAPTER XI

"SHE *SHALL* SPEAK AGAIN!"

RODNEY STEELE adjusted the light, opened Mrs. Jake's Bible, and turned to the thirty-ninth Psalm. Yes; these were the words he wanted, in slightly different form. His recollection of them was no doubt the Prayer-book version heard in the solemn funeral service.

He read the sixth verse through.

"Surely every man walketh in a vain shew; surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them."

So these words of wisdom were King David's. He knew a thing or two about the vanity of life.

Having been successful in his search, Steele was just about to close the book and lay it down, when the words which followed caught his eye. "And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in Thee."

He dismissed the last five words as holding no meaning whatever for him. But the question which preceded them held his mind.

"And now, Lord, what wait I for?"

He closed the Bible, rose, and opening the door leading to the kitchen, called Mrs. Jake.

Greatly flustered; hardly believing it was she, and not Jake, who was wanted, the little woman hurried forth, smoothing and settling her apron as she came. Rodney could see the excellent little Sarah Mimms of forty years before.

"I want to thank you, Mrs. Jake," he said, "for lending me your valuable Bible. I am sure it is a possession you greatly prize. Let me give it safely back into your own hands."

Mrs. Jake received the book with almost a hint of the curtsey she had dropped so long ago, on the proud occasion when little Sarah Mimms came forward to take it from the kind hands of the old rector.

"I thank you, sir. It is my greatest treasure," she said, simply. "But I am sure you are very welcome."

Steele returned to the hall, lighted his pipe, and drew up his chair to the fire.

"And now . . . what wait I for?"

He was clearly conscious that he had reached a point in his life where he was waiting for something. He could no longer stand the life of roaming and of exile to which he had condemned

himself; no, rather, to which a hard fate had condemned him. He had come home—to a land which held for him no home, no welcome, nobody who needed him; no love to which, in his loneliness, he could turn.

"And now . . . what wait I for?"

This question had been launched at him out of the void—no, out of the Word. Where was the answer? "My hope is in Thee." But that meant nothing to him.

"God is Love," said little Sarah's marker; but love had failed him, long ago; and he had no knowledge of God.

He was altogether self-sufficient; he was wholly self-absorbed; and this meant no hope of anything outside himself and his own resources. Yet he was conscious of a pause in the forward march of life. He had reached, again, a parting of the ways.

"And now . . . what wait I for?"

He sat, in the complete silence of the hall; isolated, alone.

Suddenly a faint sound of music came to him in the stillness.

Somebody in the adjoining flat, just on the other side of the wall, was playing Schumann's "Träumerei."

He listened to the slow, haunting melody, as it rose and fell, passed from major to minor, and back to the major once more; and, as he listened, the pain of a great bitterness arose within him.

Madge used to play the "Träumerei."

He had worked it into the theme of *The Great Divide.*

The melody, with all it recalled of joy, and of bitter pain and disillusion, seemed to provide the answer to the question over which he pondered.

He was waiting for love. He was waiting for sweet companionship; for somebody who could share with him the glory of success, who could bear with him the pain of misunderstanding or of failure.

But he had lost Madge; and, because he had lost Madge, he must wait on endlessly, without hope of finding love or comradeship.

"My hope is in thee"; but, for him, there was nobody to whom that tender pronoun applied. All his hope, all his love, his life's entire devotion, had been centred in Madge; and Madge had thrown him over, and had given herself—in all her glorious beauty, in all her utter desirableness, with all her womanly capacity to love and to be loved—Madge had given herself to another.

He hoped she would read *The Great Divide.*

He hoped, even if she did not recognise his hand in it, that it would open her eyes to a poignant vision of the depth of loneliness and despair into which she had plunged him.

The wail of the "Träumerei" still rose and fell, in an unutterable yearning of pain and of tenderness.

"And now . . . what wait I for?"

The distant clock rang out the hour of ten.

Suddenly, in full force, came back to Rodney Steele the memory of the night before, and of the kind voice.

He sprang to his feet.

"She *shall* speak to me again," he said. "What matter that I don't know her number! What matter that I know neither her name, nor her address! There *is* such a thing as mental wireless telegraphy. There *is* such a thing as mind calling to mind. Somewhere within reach of this telephone, the woman with the kind voice sits at this moment, as she sat at this hour last night. Her telephone is beside her. She knows my number. She *shall* ring me up again!"

He strode to the telephone.

He did not lift the receiver; but he laid his hand upon it.

"Speak to me again," he said; "you, who spoke

to me last night. Speak to me again. What wait I for? I wait for you! Just now—in my utter loneliness, in my empty solitude—I wait for you!"

He went back to the fireside, and sat quietly down in his chair.

The playing of the "Träumerei," on the other side of the wall, went on for a few moments; then ceased, suddenly.

Complete silence followed.

Steele sat, without moving a muscle, staring into the red heart of the fire.

The distant clock slowly chimed a quarter past the hour of ten; and—as that sound died away—the bell of the telephone rang.

Steele rose to his feet, with a smile of triumphant certainty; walked over to the telephone, and took down the receiver.

CHAPTER XII

THE KIND VOICE

"HULLO?" said Rodney Steele.

"Is this 494 Mayfair?" It was the Kind Voice.

"Yes," was all Rodney said; but there was an extraordinary ring of triumph, pleasure, and relief, in the short monosyllable.

"I am quite ashamed to trouble you again; but, when you kindly gave me the number of the Metropolitan Emergency Hospital last evening, I did not write it down, and I have no means of finding it out. They still figure as 494 Mayfair in the telephone book. It has this moment occurred to me, that I might venture to ask you to give me the number, again."

Rodney stood listening to this lengthy explanation, with a smile of amused content on his face, and a light in his eyes which would have surprised those who had seen them only in their quiet, rather stern, gravity.

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Rodney stood listening to this lengthy explanation, with a smile of amused content on his face, and a light in his eyes which would have surprised those who had seen them only in their quiet, rather stern, gravity.

Every tone of the Kind Voice was balm to his sore heart, ministering to that desperate hunger for the past, which had come upon him with his return to England.

Moreover, he knew that—however she might account for it by a sudden idea of her own—it was really he who had made her speak again. He had projected his will into the void; had launched out a wireless, voiceless message, in search of this one mind among the millions by which he was surrounded; and, sure and swift, had found her; and had forced her to respond to his call.

To have her there, at the other end of the wire, gave him a delightful sense of power—of being able to control and use an unexplained force.

Until a few moments ago, it had seemed altogether impossible that he should ever get into touch with the Kind Voice again. Yet here it was, murmuring soft requests and apologies into his ear!

Now, steady! At any moment she might ring off. He must not lose her again. The wireless telegraphy business—like an amateur conjurer's tricks—might not be possible to pull off successfully twice. He had her on the other end of the wire, now; but he must play her carefully.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. . . . Certainly I will

give you the number, with pleasure. But, listen! Will you promise not to ring off when you have it? There is something more I particularly want to say."

Complete silence at the other end.

Steele held his breath, and waited. He almost feared she had instantly hung up her receiver.

Then: "I will not ring off," said the Kind Voice, quietly.

Rodney clenched the receiver, in his relief. If he could hold her for a minute or two now, he might be able to keep in touch for as long as he would.

"Thanks," he said. "The number you want is 4923 Central. Make a note of it, but don't ring off."

"I told you I would not ring off," said the Kind Voice. "Thank you for the number. Now . . . What else do you wish to say?"

"Listen," said Rodney, eagerly. "It's rather difficult to explain. I'm afraid you'll think there's a very queer fish at this end of the wire! But—you remember you said 'good-night' to me last night? Well—perhaps you'll hardly believe it—but it was years since a woman's voice had wished me a kind 'good-night.' It made an extraordinary impression upon me. I can't at-

tempt to explain it, but—after I had hung up the receiver—I felt as if I *must* hear your voice again; as if I could not bear the idea that nothing more should ever pass between us, save that one 'good-night.' Just a voice from the void—and, ever after—silence. Do you hear? Do you think me a very queer chap?"

"I hear," said the Kind Voice, gently. "I do not know quite what to think."

"You see, I am a very lonely fellow," went on Rodney, hurriedly. "I have absolutely nobody in the world, belonging to me. Just now I am living by myself in one of the Regent House flats, lent me by a friend. I reached England the day before yesterday, after an absence of ten years; and I suppose it is coming home to no home, which has given me a sudden lonely fit."

Rodney paused, listening.

"What do you wish me to do?" asked the Kind Voice, very gently.

"Well—if you won't think it too unconventional—if you don't think me altogether mad for asking such a thing—will you ring me up, at about this time, during the next few evenings, just to say 'good-night,' and to let me have a word with you over the wire?"

There was a moment of evident hesitation.

Then: "It certainly *is* an unconventional idea," said the Kind Voice. Then she laughed,—and Steele's heart gave a throb of painful pleasure; her laugh was so like Madge's. "In fact, it is quite the most unconventional suggestion I ever heard of."

"'Unconventional' is a stupid word."

"You used it."

"I know. But I abhor it. Why should we be bound by convention?"

The laugh so like Madge's reached him again.

"Is it not taking things rather too much for granted, to talk so definitely of 'we'? "

"Not a bit! It would be ungrammatical to say 'us'; and if you knew my profession you would not tempt me to a disregard of grammar."

"Well, then I think it is time *we* said 'good-night,' and hung up *our* receivers."

"Wait a moment! I want a promise before I let you go. Dear Lady of the Kind Voice! I am at your mercy! You know my number. I have no idea of yours; and I pledge you my word of honour, I will never try to discover it. I do not know your name, and you need never know mine. I have told you I am staying at Regent House, but I have no idea from what part of the

London district you speak to me. It may be Kensington, Pimlico, or Maida Vale."

"It is neither Kensington nor Pimlico."

"Then let us conclude it is Maida Vale; though it may equally be Hampstead, Chelsea, or Mitcham. Your voice comes to me so clearly, that you might be in the room; but often, the further the distance, the clearer will be the voice. But I ask to know nothing, I seek to tell nothing. I only want you to ring me up each evening at a quarter-past ten, during the next six days, to have a few minutes' talk, and to say 'good-night.' Is that much to ask?"

"It depends," replied the Kind Voice. "It might be nothing; it might be a great deal. How do you know I can spare the time? I may be a very busy person, full of engagements. How do you know I have not a large and inquisitive family all listening to my side of this astonishing conversation, and fully prepared to be scandalised at such disregard of the conventions?"

"You found time to ring up twice about the Metropolitan Emergency Hospital," said Steele. "And is your telephone in a very public place?"

"My telephone stands upon my own writing-table; and, as a matter of fact, I, also, live quite

alone. I am"—the Kind Voice hesitated—"I am a widow."

Steele's mind played him its usual trick of ignoring the probable, in a wild leap at the improbably possible.

"A bishop's widow?" he suggested.

Again that mellow laugh, carrying with it so poignant an echo of merry old days in the Surrey lanes and hay-fields.

"No, not a bishop's widow. Why confer so great a dignity upon me?"

"Because a bishop's widow has just lent me a concordance."

"A quite unanswerable reason! And I must say, in passing, that I am glad to find your lack of conventionality fenced about by a conjunction of things so wholly correct and unimpeachable. But, if you look out 'widow' in the concordance, my friend, you will find that 'many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias'; and, I fear me, there are many widows in this great city, to-night. I wish one could be sure that they are all as safely housed, and warmed, and fed, as the bishop's widow and myself."

"Are you a philanthropist?" asked Steele.

"A what?"

"A *p—h—i—l—a—n*——"

"Oh, you need not spell the entire word! No, I am not. But I have known deep sorrow; and that opens one's heart to the sorrowful."

"Does it?" he questioned. "My experience is, that sorrow puts one behind iron bars, and tends to harden one toward all the world."

"Then you have not taken your sorrow the right way, my friend. Or, perhaps, it held for you a bitterness which made it a hard teacher."

"A cruel taskmaster," said Steele, bitterly. "No matter. I am still the 'Captain of my soul.' Do you know Henley's *Invictus*?"

"I know it, but I do not agree. There is a worse slavery than sorrow—the slavery of Self."

"What else has a man who stands absolutely alone? But I am extra bitter to-night. A tiresome person in the next flat has been playing the 'Träumerei.' It always depresses me."

"You should send round a polite note, asking the tiresome person to play something more cheerful. But why does the 'Träumerei' depress you?"

"Associations."

"I see. Now I am going to ring off. I wonder Exchange has not asked for the wire, before this."

"One minute! Will you ring up at 10.15 to-morrow?"

"Perhaps."

"Will you?"

"Yes—I will."

"You are most awfully good. Look here! Lots of people ring up this number wanting the Hospital—as you did, you know."

"Yes, I see. As I did. Do you ask them all to——"

"No, I don't! Do please listen! As the calls are so constant, the man usually answers the telephone. I shall be on the spot, of course. But, in case he takes the call first, will you say: 'Are you there?' I will tell him always to call me at once if he hears: 'Are you there?'"

"Very well. But remember I am just 'A voice from the void.'"

"You are the kindest voice in all the world, and I am beyond words grateful."

"Good-night."

"Good-night."

Rodney did not hear the click of her receiver. He still kept his to his ear.

After a few moments: "Are you there?" said the Kind Voice, softly.

"Yes," replied Rodney, at once. "What is it?"

Again the laugh, so full of haunting memories of sweetness.

"Nothing! You caught me out. I thought you had rung off. I was merely making sure that I remembered."

"Make sure you don't forget."

"I will not forget. Good-night."

"Good-night."

This time he heard the click of hers, and hung up his receiver.

Then he looked round the empty hall. It did not seem empty. He hardly felt alone.

He went back to his chair and his pipe.

What an extraordinary thing he had accomplished, in thus establishing a friendship with a voice. During his exile, he had shunned the society and the friendship of women. But this was just a voice, with a woman's great, tender, understanding heart behind it. Moreover, it was the only voice he had ever heard which recalled to him the voice of the woman he loved.

Ought he to have told her this?

No; why should he? She would never know his name, nor he hers. They could never, by any possibility, meet. But it would help him through these hard days, to look forward to the evening, knowing that at 10.15 the telephone-bell would ring, and the voice so like Madge's in its rich depth of tone, would say: "Are you there?"

The heart of the fire still glowed red. It reminded him of a sunset, seen through black rocks.

The piano was going again, next door. Once more the "Träumerei" came stealing through the wall. But he did not mind it now. His restless spirit, for the moment, was content.

What had the Kind Voice said? "Sorrow opens one's heart to the sorrowful." And when he questioned this: "Then you have not taken your sorrow the right way, my friend." Was there a right way to take a sorrow such as his? Could it engender aught but bitterness?

Time is supposed to be a healer of wounds. Be that as it may, the passing of years certainly numbs and deadens the pain. But his old wound had broken out afresh, with the reading of that announcement on the evening of his arrival: "At Simla, on November the 26th, to Lord and Lady Hilary—a son."

He wondered what his telephone friend would say, if she could know the whole history of the wrecking of his life's happiness. What she had said to-night, was very true: "Perhaps it held for you a bitterness which made it a hard teacher." A hard teacher! Good Heavens! All it had taught him was never to trust to a woman's love.

He turned deliberately from the past, and dwelt upon the present. He did not want to lose this new-found sense of peace.

He was glad his telephone friend was a widow. Widows were understanding and reasonable. They knew the ways and vagaries of men, and were less likely to be impatient of them than wives. The entire sex gained by the canonisation of one, probably unworthy, man. Why did death always create a halo?

Probably the kind voice belonged to one who was what is called "a widow of a certain age." Steele hoped so. It would have bored him to have had a young girl giggling at the other end of the telephone. He liked the soft maturity of her laugh, and the measured confidence of her calm speech.

He felt quite sure she was a philanthropist, notwithstanding her denial. Probably her instinct for philanthropy had caused her to agree to take him on.

Perhaps she was planning to open a Home for Widows. If so he should certainly subscribe. He would promise a thousand pounds. Then she would have to tell him to whom to draw the cheque, and where to send it. Of course it would be possible to seal up bank-notes in an envelope,

leave them with the hall-porter, give her a password on the telephone, and let her send for them.

He wondered how many widows could be "safely housed, and warmed, and fed," for a thousand a year. He grew quite interested over working this out. He made up his mind to ask for full particulars of the Home for Widows, directly she rang him up on the following evening. Then he remembered that it was really, more or less, his own idea.

At length he poked the red sunset into a blaze, put on more coal, went to the table and did a good hour's work, before going to bed.

And, as he worked, he softly whistled the yearning theme of the "Träumerei."

CHAPTER XIII

"MANY WIDOWS WERE IN ISRAEL"

VIEWED and reviewed during the practical prose of breakfast, the happenings of the previous night took on a fantastic form, which made them appear to belong rather to the phantasm of slumber, than to the sober realities of waking hours.

Surely he had dreamed that he reached out into space and found the Kind Voice; found her without the help of wires or of bells; aye, even without the assistance of that omniscient individual, known familiarly as "Exchange."

Surely he had slept even more profoundly, and dreamed even more wildly, when the owner of the kind voice was promising, gently, to ring him up at 10.15 to-night.

Yet he started, and kept his seat with difficulty, when the telephone-bell rang outside; and when Jake, instead of giving the hospital number, opened the dining-room door, saying: "You're

wanted on the telephone, sir," Rodney dashed to the instrument, vexed at his delay, and perfectly certain who was awaiting him at the other end. Obviously she had thought he meant 10.15 A.M. instead of 10.15 P.M.

He lifted the receiver.

"Hullo?" he said, eagerly. "Hullo! Is it you?"

"Of course it's me, old chap," came Billy's good-tempered voice, jovial and ungrammatical. "But, what's up? You sound rather as if I were a straw, and you, a drowning man! Are you bored stiff?"

Steele mastered his annoyance, which indeed was with himself, rather than with Billy.

"I'm all right, Billy," he said. "Jolly and comfortable as possible."

"I've rung up," shouted Billy, "to say you really must come down to us at once. The fogs and cold must be so beastly in town. Here we have brilliant sunshine; the ice bears; we shall be skating on the lake to-morrow. Look up a train, and come to-day, old chap."

"Thanks, Billy. I am grateful. But I can't leave town just yet. I am proof-reading, and—well, I have heaps of work to do."

"Isn't it beastly rotten to be all alone?" shouted Billy.

"Not at all. Quite used to it. I assure you, I'm quite jolly. Wouldn't leave town just now, for the world."

"All right, Rod. As you like. There's always a welcome here, waiting. . . . What? . . . No, we haven't finished. Another three minutes, please. Hold on, Rodney. Valeria wants to speak to you."

Steele heard a rustle at the other end, and a faint laugh. He resisted an impulse to hang up the receiver before this other woman's voice should reach him. He could almost imagine the heavy scent of violet essence which enveloped Lady Valeria. Then he distinctly heard her say: "Go away, Billy, do! I can't talk to the man while you stand grinning there. Shut the door, will you!" Then, in ingratiating tones:

"How do you do, Mr. Steele?"

"Good-morning, Lady Valeria."

"How nice really to talk to you at last! We were so sorry you were out yesterday when we dropped in. Do come down here soon."

"You are very kind, Lady Valeria. But work keeps me in town until Christmas."

"How tiresome! Why can't you work here?"

Steele availed himself of the telephonic privilege of leaving an awkward question unanswered.

"I particularly want a talk with you, Mr. Steele—can you hear?—about *The Great Divide.* You have read it, haven't you?"

"I have it here."

"I know. I saw it on the table. I want to know your opinion. Do you think it was written by a man or by a woman?"

"It was written by a man, Lady Valeria."

"Oh, you *are* decided! You will have to tell me why you think that. I believe I shall be able to prove to you that it was written by a woman."

"You will not be able to do that, Lady Valeria. *The Great Divide* is the work of a man."

"Do you think it strong and clever?"

"I think the man who wrote it, said what he meant to say, to the best of his ability."

"What qualified praise! Why do authors so rarely have the generosity to be frankly enthusiastic over one another's books?"

Again Steele left the question unanswered.

"Now tell me," began Lady Valeria—but here Trunk intervened with a peremptory "Time's up!"—"Why does this rude person say 'Time's up' to me?"

"Because this is a trunk call, and you have had six minutes."

"But I have a great deal more to say."

"Have you finished?" inquired Trunk.

"Yes," said Rodney, quickly.

"I want to know," squeaked Lady Valeria's pettish voice. Chop went Trunk, sure and swift. A sudden and complete silence followed.

Rodney stood for a moment in full enjoyment of not knowing what Lady Valeria wanted to know.

Then he hung up the receiver, and went back to breakfast.

Jake, who had been keeping things hot, replaced the dishes and lifted the covers.

"Jake," said Rodney, "when you answer the telephone, if the person who rings up says 'Are you there?' the call will be for me. Be good enough, in that case, to fetch me immediately, without mentioning my name or asking theirs."

"Right, sir," said Jake.

This satisfactory word, was Jake's invariable mode of reply. Steele felt sure that when the minister who united Jake to Sarah Mimms put the question "Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?" Jake must have answered, "Right, sir."

Steele finished breakfast, in cheerful spirits.

This little interlude at the telephone had

served to establish completely the reality of the experiences of the night before. He had now had a conversation over the telephone with another woman whom he had not as yet seen, and the personality behind the Kind Voice was more real to him than that of Lady Valeria. The former was his friend, already; and they would speak again to-night.

He went to his morning's work with energy and courage.

At noon the wintry sunshine called him out.

He strolled into the park, and came upon the piece of water in which a large collection of water-fowl swam and waddled, and over which a cloud of hungry gulls hovered, hoping to be fed.

At sight of them, Steele realised how much he was missing the beautiful bird-life with which he had been for so long surrounded.

Little children, out with their nurses, were throwing scraps of bread into the water.

Steele hastened to the nearest grocer, bought three pennyworth of cheese, and returned to the park.

Crusts of stale bread were floating about, too unappetising even for the hungry birds.

Standing on the frosty grass at the water's

edge, Steele took out a pocket-knife, opened his packet of cheese, chopped it into small pieces, and began throwing them, one by one. He was instantly surrounded by a quacking, eager crowd.

He did not take much interest in the tame ducks; he wanted the wild sea-birds, circling above him on gleaming, snowy wings.

He threw little bits of cheese into the air, and with cries of delight they swooped by, catching the cheese before it fell. The swift dexterity with which they caught it as they flew, was pretty to see; but Steele wanted more than this.

Standing very still, he threw a shorter distance each time. The white wings flashed nearer and nearer. He could feel, against his face, the wind they made in passing.

Presently he laid the cheese on his big palm, held it out, and imitated, exactly, the cry of the gulls.

At first they circled higher, answering him. Then one made a swooping dash at the cheese, in passing; then another rested one moment on his sleeve. Soon he had them perched upon his shoulder, his arm, his wrist, eager and unafraid.

A passing nurse, wheeling a perambulator, paused to watch. "Pretty birds," she said to her small charge. "Look at them! Ducks,

Georgie, ducks! See their white wings and pink feet. And that great big man is their keeper. He comes to them at feeding-time. See how the pretty creatures know the keeper! Georgie say: 'Quack, quack!' Now we must go home. It is Georgie's feeding-time."

Steele did not dare turn his head. A movement on his part would have meant the instant lifting of the dainty coral feet from his sleeve, the rapid spreading of white wings in flight.

But he smiled at the idea of these wild seabirds with a keeper. Nothing could keep them save Love and Need. He loved them, and they needed that which his love could supply. So they trusted him, and came.

How like the wild human heart!—not to be held by bolts and bars, not to be caged by any keepers, save Love and Need.

He heard the wheels of the perambulator move slowly on, crunching over the gravel.

Then footsteps came by, and paused behind him.

Somebody stood watching.

The silent watcher coughed.

Steele turned his head. At once there was a rush of wings.

Behind him, on the path, stood a woman's

tall figure, severely clad in black. Her large and rather hollow eyes were fixed upon him. There was white at her neck and wrists; a veil enveloped her.

Steele realised, in that one glance—she was a widow!

"Great Scott!" said Rodney Steele. "A widow! And a very black-edged widow!"

He went on rapidly throwing cheese into the air.

Presently he looked round again. The widow still stood watching him.

"Heavens!" said Rodney. "She is rather gaunt, and looks severe. But outward appearances are ever apt to be deceptive. She may have a kind voice."

The ducks came quacking to his feet.

He chopped up the rest of the cheese, and dropped it around him.

Again he looked nervously behind. The widow had advanced a step nearer.

"She certainly has the appearance of being 'safely housed and warmed and fed' when at home," thought Rodney. "Now which is she? The Concordance, or the Kind Voice?"

He could endure the solemn silence no longer. The widow must be made to speak. This suspense could not continue.

Behind the tall figure on the path, stood a gay little crowd of brown-coated London sparrows, waiting for chance crumbs of the good things thrown to rarer and more important birds—merry little waifs and strays, to whom nothing came amiss.

Turning completely round, Steele stepped up the bank, and emptied the crumbled remains of his cheese on to the gravel-walk, among the twittering, chirping sparrows.

Then he rubbed his hands with his handkerchief, cleaned the blade of his knife on the turf, shut it with a snap, restored it to his pocket, and stood erect beside the widow, watching the swimming, diving, flying, waddling crowd.

"A pretty sight, isn't it?" he said, pleasantly.

"An exceedingly sinful waste of good cheese, *I* call it," said the widow. "Why, may I ask—with the teeming, hungry multitudes of this great city, all around you—do you throw cheese to miserable sea-gulls?"

"Because I had not time to buy whitebait," said Rodney, meekly; and, lifting his hat, went on his way rejoicing.

She was a widow, and a widow of a certain age. She was also evidently a philanthropist; but, thank heaven, her speech betrayed her. She

was not the Kind Voice. She was not even the Concordance. He felt sure the bishop's widow would not have said "mis-er-able sea-gulls," in that hollow, litany-like tone, of those gleaming white wings, bright eyes, and coral feet.

"Many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias." This was one of them! He felt so glad he had mentioned the whitebait. It was the kind of thing you think of afterwards, and wish you had said.

He wondered whether the gaunt widow would tell the story at a committee for feeding the hungry and deserving poor. He felt quite certain she would never advocate feeding the *un*deserving poor, however hungry.

If she ever fell on evil days herself, she should not be admitted to the Widows' Home. He would make that a stipulation before handing over his subscription. No widow would be eligible for admission, who did not fully approve of three pennyworth of cheese being thrown to hungry birds. He should tell the Kind Voice so, to-night. If she had already drawn up her paper of rules, this must be added as a postscript, or he would withdraw his promised thousand pounds.

He hurried through his solitary luncheon; then

went out again. The whirl of the gulls' white wings, the touch of their clinging feet upon his wrist, had stirred in him the instinctive need of open air; of the freedom of sun, and sky, and wind. He felt cooped up, between four walls. The cosy flat became a prison. He must have liberty to move, to walk, to breathe.

He made his way to the Marble Arch, and so into Hyde Park.

By the time he turned homeward, it seemed to him that his entire afternoon had been spent in chasing widows.

He overtook them in the park, walking serenely by straight or devious ways, according to the will and pleasure of tiny Pekinese dogs, who trotted proudly, each with a widow at the other end of his lead, and stared indignantly at Rodney, with angry, bulging eyes, if he paused to overhear the voice which addressed them.

Widows flew past him in motors; or lay back stoutly in high barouches, swung upon easy springs, and drawn by high-stepping steeds.

Widows looked out of brougham windows, in the blocks in Bond Street; angry annoyance on their chastened faces.

Widows hurried into the shops in Regent Street, intent upon Christmas shopping. If

Rodney saw a likely one, he followed her in, contrived to hear her voice; then promptly walked out again. In one very fashionable shop, he marched absently upstairs in the wake of a widow, and suddenly found himself challenged by an austere person in black satin, who said, pointedly: "What can we do for you *here*, sir?" The emphasis upon the "here," caused Rodney to look around him. Abashed, he turned and fled.

Widows, widows, everywhere! He had no idea London held so many. Israel, in the days of Elias, can have been nothing to it. And all of them prosperous and well-fed.

Just one he chanced upon, at the corner of a quiet street, whose mourning was thin and frayed. She shivered, and sold matches.

"Are you a widow?" asked Rodney, lifting his hat.

The white lips quivered.

"I am, sir," she said.

"Do you think it would be a sinful waste, to give three pennyworth of cheese to hungry birds?"

She looked up into his face, surprised at the question. Then a smile dawned in her tired eyes.

"I don't know about cheese, sir," she said; "but I share my crumbs with the little birds, when I have any to share."

"Why do you share your crumbs with the little birds, my friend?" asked Rodney, gently.

She looked at him again, and this time the smile reached the pale lips.

"Because, sir, it says somewhere: 'Your heavenly Father feedeth them.' I am too poor to do much; but I like a share, no matter how small and humble, in God's work."

Rodney felt in his pocket for a sovereign.

"May I have the privilege," he said, "of buying a box of your matches? And will you oblige me by not troubling yourself to give me change?"

The weary woman looked at the gold in her hand.

"Dear God!" she said. "It means house and home for me! How did you know?"

"I didn't know," said Rodney, pocketing his matches. "But it says somewhere: 'Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.'"

He walked rapidly on; for the widow was catching her breath in quick, short sobs, and trying to thank him. Also, he was half-ashamed of having quoted Scripture. The passage came into his mind, and was too apt to be resisted. See what came of borrowing little Sarah Mimms's Bible, and the bishop's concordance! And, after all,

why should one be ashamed of quoting the Bible? One quotes Shakespeare and Byron, Voltaire and Virgil. Yet the Bible is older and wiser than they.

As he mounted the steps at Regent House, in the entrance hall he saw yet another widow, talking to Maloney. A gentle widow, this; elderly and gracious. Her peaceful face was softly framed by folded wings of silvery hair. The kind eyes, looking past Maloney, rested on the tall figure and bronzed face of the man who had paused in the doorway.

As he met those kind old eyes, Rodney's heart stood still.

Was it—? It must be! How had she found him out? Good heavens! The preposterous cheek of having asked her to ring him up!

Following the lady's look, Maloney turned, and saw Steele standing in the doorway.

"Here *is* Mr. Steele, madam," said Maloney.

Rodney advanced, hat in hand.

"The lady was inquiring for you, sir," volunteered Maloney, by way of introduction. Then he stepped back, and Rodney stood looking down into those kind old eyes.

"I must apologise," he began, lamely. "I am afraid my request of last night must have seemed to you the most unmitigated cheek."

"Not at all, Mr. Steele. It afforded me the greatest pleasure to render the least little service to a writer whose delightful books——"

But Rodney was himself again.

At the first sound of her voice, he had dropped his apologetic bearing. It was a sweet voice; it held a sympathetic caress. But—it was not the Kind Voice. No, no! It had not the magic depth and richness which reminded him of Madge. This was no doubt the bishop's widow. She was speaking of the concordance.

They entered the lift together.

She laid her hand, in motherly fashion, on his sleeve.

"Mr. Steele, you are welcome to the use of any books in my late dear husband's library. The Bishop was a great reader, and always purchased a book he valued, never borrowed it. The Bishop used to say: 'A book worth reading, is a book worth buying.' Are you engaged upon a theological work?"

"No," said Rodney. "I suddenly wanted to find one particular text."

"How interesting," said the bishop's widow. "I wonder whether I might ask which text?"

"'He heapeth up riches,'" said Rodney, "'and knoweth not who shall gather them.'"

The kind eyes were full of gentle interest.

"What can have led you to dwell upon that passage?"

"A big cheque from my publishers," said Rodney, "and having nobody with whom to share it."

The lift stopped at the first floor.

The bishop's widow stepped out.

"Good-evening, Mr. Steele," she said. "Come and see me if you ever feel inclined to do so. It would give me very great pleasure."

"Thank you," said Rodney, through the brass gate. "I should feel it a privilege."

As he mounted higher, he realised that there had been tears in the eyes of the bishop's widow.

How easily women weep! This was the second widow whom he had left in tears, within the last quarter of an hour!

He let himself into the flat, with a feeling of relief, and a sense of safety.

In less than three hours he would hear the Kind Voice again.

After all he was glad that his hunt among the widows of London had not resulted in a meeting with her. A telephone friendship was wiser and better. Even a widow can't weep down the telephone!

"Jake," he said, "a whisky and soda, please. I've been on the go, the whole afternoon."

"Right, sir," said Jake.

CHAPTER XIV

A TELEPHONE FRIENDSHIP

PUNCTUALLY at 10.15 the telephone-bell rang.

Rodney took down the receiver.

"Hullo!"

"Are you there?" asked the Kind Voice.

"I should jolly well think I am!" said Rodney, gleefully. "I wouldn't be anywhere else, for a king's ransom. I've lived all day, for this hour."

"I do not propose talking to you for an hour, my friend."

"Don't be so literal. I used the expression, figuratively."

"Well? Have you had a good day?"

"First-rate. I worked until noon. And since then——"

"What have you been doing since then?"

"I've been out—chasing widows."

"Chasing widows! What an interesting occupation! Did you find many?"

"Crowds! I found a gaunt widow, and a stout widow; a placid widow, and a worried widow; many busy widows, and one frayed widow; and, last of all, in the entrance to these flats, the bishop's widow. I did not know, until to-day, what lots of widows there are in London. I found them in the park, and in Piccadilly; in Bond Street, Oxford Street, and Regent Street. But I found only one in any way eligible for admission to your Widows' Home."

"To my *what?*"

"To your W, i, d——"

"Yes, I heard! But what Home? And why mine?"

"Aren't you starting a Home for Widows, where they will be safely housed, and warmed, and fed?"

"This is the first I have heard of it."

"How odd. I have been taking the greatest interest in the plan, since our talk last night. I propose to subscribe one thousand pounds, annually."

"Excellent! Such a subscription should start the idea."

"I have been revising your rules of admission."

"We will draw them up together."

"Over the telephone?"

"Why not? It will oblige us to be definite and concise."

"All right," said Rodney. "You think it out, and submit the rules to me, when ready. Now let's drop philanthropy. I want to hear of your day. Have you had a good time?"

"Very. The sunshine called me out. I took a long walk. After a while I found myself in Regent's Park, and saw such a pretty sight."

"What was that?"

"I saw a man feeding the gulls, beside the piece of water where they keep ducks, and geese, and foreign birds."

"Oh!"

"He wasn't just throwing bread into the water, as most people do. He stood upon the bank and called them. At first they hovered above, in a white cloud; and then, down they swooped and perched upon him. He was a very tall man. I thought it such a pretty sight."

"Oh! . . . Did you notice—did you by any chance see—er, what he gave them?"

"No; I was not near enough to see that. I kept at a distance, partly concealed among the shrubs, for fear of frightening them away. But they fed from his hand. I think he must be a lover of wild birds. I longed to ask him to teach me the secret."

"Oh! . . . What else have you done to-day?"

"Well, this evening I have been reading. Ah —and, by the way, has your tiresome person next door been playing the 'Träumerei' again?"

"Not to-night. Why?"

"Because my mind has been running on the 'Träumerei.' I have just begun a book in which it occurs as a constant theme. A deeply interesting book, I think; though I am no further, at present, than the third chapter. It is called *The Great Divide*. Have you read it?"

"Yes, I have read it. I say! I am awfully glad you are reading *The Great Divide*, because —well, since I got back to England, I have heard it a good deal discussed; I have read a great many reviews, and—I should immensely like to know your opinion. Will you ring up and tell me what you think of it, to-morrow night?"

"Certainly I will; but I read slowly. I shall hardly finish it by to-morrow night."

"No hurry. We can talk it over up to the point you have reached. Have you any idea as to the identity of the author?"

"None. But I was told the other day by—the friend who recommended me to read it, that 'Max Romer' is a *nom-de-plume*, and possibly a woman."

"Your friend was wrong. *The Great Divide* is a man's work. A woman would have given the book a different ending. No woman could have suffered as the man must have suffered who wrote *The Great Divide*."

"Don't you believe women to be capable of suffering?"

"Not as men suffer. Women have more outlets. Their griefs evaporate."

"And yours?"

"Harden, crystallise, petrify; turn that which was warm in us, to ice; that which was soft, to stone. You'll find all about it, in Max Romer's book. What do you think of it, so far?"

"I think it is a wonderfully tender description of a very young and very simple love. I think Max Romer, whoever he is, knows exactly what the first fresh love of two young hearts can be. It rings true; yet somehow it makes one ache a little for them. They are so very sure of each other, and of themselves. It will be so terrible if either fails the other."

"Have you finished the third chapter?"

"Not quite."

"Shall you read any more to-night?"

"Yes, I shall read until half-past eleven."

"Oh, I say! Look here! Will you ring me up

at half-past eleven, and tell me where you leave off, and what you think of the development?"

"No, my friend; I think not. Once is enough. I promised only for 10.15."

"All right. You're more than good, as it is. But I am specially keen about *The Great Divide*. However—I must wait."

"Only until 10.15 to-morrow evening. I will not forget."

"Must you go? Are you sure you don't know what the gulls were having in the park this morning?"

"I have not the faintest idea; but I think it was something they liked better than bread. Good-night."

"Are you sure you did not mind what I said about chasing widows?"

"Not a bit. It is excellent for widows to be chased. Someday, perhaps, you will chase me, in Regent Street."

"No such luck! Are you really going? Well —Good-night."

Silence followed. She had hung up her receiver.

"Have you finished there?" inquired Exchange, with some asperity; and Rodney rang off.

He returned to his chair, sobered and grave; also inclined to feel a little flat and disappointed.

He had so greatly counted upon that evening's telephone talk; yet somehow there had been less of romance about it to-night. It had been so very matter-of-fact and prosaic. She had taken their telephone friendship so completely as a matter of course. She had discussed things as calmly as if they had talked together over the telephone for years.

Yet it was the same kind voice; so sweet an echo of the past. But she had not laughed to-night; and he had been counting upon hearing her laugh. Perhaps her mind had been somewhat taken up with other things. And, by the way, the conversation had given him much food for thought.

So she had actually been in the park that morning, and had seen him feeding the gulls! For a moment dismay had seized him, remembering the gaunt widow. But that stern person's voice and her mental attitude, had been utterly foreign, in every possible way, to the voice and mind of his telephone friend.

No, she had evidently, as she said, remained at a distance, and had not now the faintest suspicion that it was he whom she had seen.

What a strange coincidence!

And then to think that she was reading his own book—that book into which he had put, under

deftly changed circumstances, his own life's tragedy.

What would she think of it? Would she understand it?

He wanted her to understand. It would mean so much to him if this woman, with the voice so like Madge's voice, admitted that his book rang true; that *The Great Divide* was the Real Thing. Already he delighted in her words about the opening chapters—in what she had said of the first fresh love of two young hearts; and she seemed to have a premonition that they might fail each other.

Where was she now?

He fetched the book from the library; drew his chair nearer to the fire, turned on the portable light which stood upon the little table beside him, and began the fourth chapter. He would read until half-past eleven. Then he would know, approximately, whereabouts she left off.

But, as he read, he soon lost touch with his surroundings. He forgot even the kind voice of his telephone friend.

His work possessed that peculiar quality of all subconscious work: the power to hold and to absorb even its author.

Rodney read on until midnight.

He did not hear the chimes of the distant clock, nor the slow tolling of the hour; but, a few minutes later, he flung down the book, and rose to his feet. The silence around him had been broken sharply by a sudden sound: the loud, insistent call of the telephone.

Still half dazed, Rodney crossed the hall and took down the receiver.

CHAPTER XV

THE WIND IN THE CHIMNEY

"HULLO?" said Rodney Steele. And instantly the Kind Voice cried: "Are you there?"

He could scarcely believe his ears; and yet, after the first moment, he was not surprised.

"Oh, are you there, my friend?"

"Yes," he said, "of course I'm here! I believe I knew you would ring up. I have been reading it, too; ever since we said 'good-night.' I had just reached the scene in which she returns his letter, unopened."

"Ah!" said the Kind Voice, and for once it had lost its measured calm; "I am even beyond that; and—I simply couldn't bear it alone. I had to ring up."

"I asked you to do so, didn't I? And you refused. Now *The Great Divide* has forced you to it." There was triumph in his tone. "It is a victory for *The Great Divide*."

"It is," she said, "Max Romer might be proud.

I am rarely unnerved by a book. But you admit he has stirred you, too? Still, though the sheer strength and force of it carries one along, it does not blind one's critical faculty. I see exactly where *The Great Divide* fails to be true to life."

"Do you?" said Rodney Steele. "Will you tell me where?"

"It is difficult to explain over the telephone. But I will try. Well, to begin with: do you think it possible for a man—sane in every other respect—to write a dozen love-letters to a woman, and forget them completely—one by one—as they were written; and to have written them without really loving that woman; simply confusing her with a fictitious creation of his own brain?"

"I know it to be possible," said Rodney, "as the result of cerebral hæmorrhage. Any doctor would confirm that fact. And, remember, Valentine had worked at a manuscript with an ice-bag on his head, when he should have been lying in a darkened room, doing nothing. The wonder is, it did not cost him his reason."

"Very well. We will grant that. I am not learned in medical matters. But upon the other point which strikes me as not true to life, I am able to give an expert opinion. I think I know more of a woman's heart, than does Max Romer.

And I tell you this, my friend. No girl—particularly so really fine a character as he has drawn in Katherine—would throw over the man she loved and whom she was just about to marry, simply because another woman showed her a packet of old love-letters; and not only throw him over, but refuse to see him or give him a hearing, and return his letter of explanation unopened. It is preposterous! It is impossible! A silly little scatter-brain, self-centred, and easily piqued, might have acted so; but not Katherine; not a girl who knew love, as Max Romer draws it."

"She was very young," said Rodney. "She was untried, untested. It came upon her as a sudden shock, and—she failed him."

"I admit she was young," said the Kind Voice, firmly. "She did not know a woman's love—the patient, understanding love, which can forgive anything, providing the man's devotion to herself holds true. Personally, I doubt whether any girl in her teens is woman enough to give the kind of love a man needs. You men, even the best of you—perhaps specially the best of you—are essentially children. To meet all your needs, the woman who loves you must have the years and the experience which enable her to combine the mother with the wife. . . . Can you hear

all I am saying? It is not easy to talk so consecutively through the telephone! . . . I grant you, Katherine's love was the love of a girl; but it was the noble love of a noble girl. The critics are perfectly right when they say that she would not have thrown her lover over for the reason Max Romer gives. He has written his book with intense conviction; yet he fails to convince those who really know love and life. Katherine would not have acted so."

"She would, and she did!" said Rodney, vehemently.

There was the pause of a surprised silence. Then the Kind Voice at his ear, inquired gently: "What do you mean, my friend? Why do you speak so strongly? Are we not merely discussing the much discussed work of fiction of a new and unknown writer?"

"We are discussing facts!" cried Rodney. "We are discussing the tragedy of a man's spoilt life, which he has been fool enough to dress up in the garb of fiction and give to the world, in order that the world may wag its head so wisely, and say: 'This is not true to life. The girl would not have acted so.' I say, she *did* act so; and, in acting so, she broke the man who loved and trusted her. My friend, as we may never

meet but thus, I will trust you with a secret known to nobody. I shall feel it something of a relief for once to have it shared; and you will understand how maddening it is to me to hear *The Great Divide* condemned as not true to life. *You are speaking to Max Romer.* I am he! Into that book I have woven the tragedy of my own life. Val's mischance fell upon me. Then the girl I worshipped and trusted, treated me precisely as Katherine, in *The Great Divide*, treated Valentine. This is why I know I am right, and I know the critics are wrong. Now—do you understand?"

Rodney paused, listening.

No answer came.

He waited. A tense silence followed his impetuous outburst.

At length: "Hullo!" he called. "Are you there?"

No reply reached him.

He rang up the Exchange.

"Why have you cut us off? We had not finished."

"I didn't," snapped Exchange, crossly. "They rang off at the other end."

"It must have been a mistake. Can't you put me through again?"

"Number, please."

"I don't know the number."

"Then I can't put you through."

"Oh—all right. Good-night."

Rodney walked back to his chair, and sat down.

He felt perplexed—almost bewildered.

Why had she rung off at the most important point in their conversation?

His confidence—so great a thing for him to have given—seemed flung back at him, without one word of sympathy or of comprehension.

It was unlike the Kind Voice to do this.

He would not credit her with unkindness.

It must have been a mistake—probably on the part of the telephone operator.

Very likely they had been disconnected before his impulsive confession could reach her. This was, perhaps, for the best. Already he had begun to regret it. It was so essential for him, that his identity with Max Romer should not become known.

How strange that she should side with those who questioned the probability of the main fact in the plot of *The Great Divide*. He would have credited her with a more accurate knowledge of life.

Well, anyway, there was one woman in the

world who, if she ever chanced to read it, would know it to be true—bitterly, remorselessly, true.

Rodney brooded over his pipe for a while, half hoping to be called again to the telephone. But no call came; and at length he went to bed.

His sleep, at first, was fitful and restless. He woke at two o'clock in the morning, fancying he heard, through the wall, the desperate, hopeless sobbing of a woman. But when he sat up and listened, he came to the conclusion that it had been the gusty moaning of the December wind in the chimney.

He had been dreaming of the frayed widow, selling matches at the bleak street-corner.

As he turned over, he made up his mind to seek her out, and ensure that she should be permanently "safely housed and warmed, and fed." A sovereign could not mean house and home for very long. And it was no good waiting until the proposed Home for Widows should be in working order.

He must have been asleep a minute later, for a gull settled on his wrist, and, looking up at him with bright black eyes, remarked: "A sinful waste of cheese, I call it." As it flew away, Rodney noticed that it wore widow's weeds. He tried to keep it in view, amongst the flock of

gulls, to make sure it got no cheese; then found they all flew by, in bonnets and black veils. He turned from them, disgusted; and, out from behind the trees, over the grass, toward him came Madge—radiant and wonderful—both hands outstretched.

"Oh, Madge!" he said. "Oh, Madge!"

And, smiling serenely, Madge said: "Are you there?"

"Where is the little child, Madge?" he asked, standing before her, with folded arms.

And Madge replied: "There is no little child, Roddie. There never was."

Then he put his arms around her.

Yes, he slept. And, at last, the sad "wind in the chimney" sobbed itself, also, to silence; and all was still.

CHAPTER XVI

SUSPENSE

STEELE awoke the next morning with a sense of frustration weighing heavily upon him. He had been balked.

He hated to be balked. Something had gone wrong. What was it?

Then he remembered that his telephone friend had cut herself off from him, the moment she knew he was Max Romer. Why had she done this?

Last night he had tried to persuade himself that the sudden silence was a mistake of the Exchange.

This morning he knew she had done it herself.

But why? Was she vexed that he had trapped her into giving a frank criticism of his book, before she knew it to be his? She would not have spoken either so strongly or so freely as she had done, if he had said: "I wrote *The Great Divide*, and I want your opinion of the

book. I should like to know whether you think it really true to life." She would have answered honestly—the Kind Voice could not be other than honest—but she would have expressed herself differently. Probably she had rung off under an impulse of very natural annoyance with him for a lack of perfect straightforwardness toward her.

Steele reviewed his share of the conversation, while he breakfasted, and watched the sunrise gleam, pale gold, between the Harley Street chimneys.

Undoubtedly he had not been quite honest in the matter—and any lack of sincerity between friends, was unpardonable.

He had said: "I am interested"—"I have heard"—"I have read." That would have been all right to a bookseller, to a reporter, or even to Billy, or to any chance acquaintance. But, to the Kind Voice there was but one thing he could say, if he said anything at all: "I wrote."

Steele possessed an instinctive scorn of subterfuge. Years spent in other lands, had but served to accentuate his natural British honesty.

He justified her vexation, and resolved on frank apology directly she rang him up that evening.

But—would she ring him up? That was the question! He thought she would. She had promised. Yet women have a queer way, sometimes, of not considering a promise to be binding if circumstances—displeasing to themselves—have intervened.

He worked steadily all the morning.

A charming note came up from the bishop's widow, inviting him to take tea with her on the following afternoon.

"Many people would like to be asked to meet you," wrote Mrs. Bellamy, "but I am going to beg you to forgive me, if I deny my friends that pleasure, and keep you to myself this time. The Bishop used to say: 'Only when people know one another very well, can they enjoy conversing in a crowd.' So we will keep out the crowd tomorrow, my dear Mr. Steele, if you will give me the great pleasure of your company at tea."

This graceful invitation pleased Steele. He replied at once, accepting it.

In the afternoon he went to the Zoological Gardens. His books had brought him a considerable reputation as an authority on wild animals and foreign birds. He had written to a Fellow of the Society, with whom he had long

corresponded, and now met him there, by appointment.

He spent several delightful hours, absorbed in a subject he loved; winning the trust and response of birds and beasts in a magic way of his own, which amazed even the keepers.

At length, his identity becoming known, an interested crowd followed him round. When Steele first noticed this, he wondered why so many people should chance to be interested in the particular animal he had come to that house to see. But presently it dawned upon him that the crowd was there, not to see the animals, but to see him see the animals!

Steele disliked that kind of thing. He declined to be lionised—even at the Zoo.

He left abruptly, accepting an invitation for Sunday from his friend.

He felt oppressed and saddened by the cages. Bars and bolts, even of the kindest, mean loss of liberty; and loss of liberty comes second only, in disastrous effect, to loss of life.

He strode rapidly through the park, making for the piece of water close to Regent House, where he would find the swoop of free white wings.

Life, Light, Liberty! Death, Darkness, Doom,

Dungeons, Despair! Why does the letter L stand so often for the lovely, lovable things of life, whereas D denotes those which are dark, dismal, dreadful, and despondent?

Rodney worked this out, as he walked. He even arrived at: "Only Luke is with me. Demas hath forsaken me." Then smiled to think that the effect of the bishop's concordance still lingered in his subconsciousness.

"Lazarus and Dives" came into his mind, as he saw the crowd of humble sparrows on the path, waiting for chance crumbs which might fall from the food thrown to birds of richer, rarer plumage. This reminded him of the poor frayed widow, selling matches, and of the £ s. d. which stood for his own large income; the S in the centre indicating that, whether his possession of money should be lifted to the L's, or dropped down to the D's, would largely depend upon how he spent it.

Then he thought of *The Great Divide*, the final word so expressive of the desolation of his own life, and realised that Love alone could have bridged that chasm.

He did not have much success that afternoon in his attempt to tame the gulls. He could not give them an undivided mind. He kept watching

the opposite bank; turning to look up and down the path; glancing behind the trees, and among the bushes.

But nobody who could possibly be supposed to resemble the owner of the Kind Voice, was anywhere in sight.

Looking back over the day, as he drew his easy chair to the fire after dinner, he realised that "frustration" was the word which best described it. He had awakened with a sense of being balked, and all day long he had felt frustrated at every turn. Even his morning's work had not been wholly satisfactory. A certain restlessness in himself had been partly responsible for this. He could not concentrate his mind fully upon other things, however interesting or important, until he knew why the woman, whose voice so resembled Madge's, had cut herself off from him the moment she knew him to be Max Romer, author of *The Great Divide*.

He looked at his watch. A quarter to nine. Another hour and a half to wait!

He had hardly slipped his watch back into his pocket, when the telephone sounded.

Vague people wanting the hospital, had been particularly tiresome, at all hours, that day.

Rodney was very comfortably ensconced in his chair. He lifted a long leg lazily, intending to press the electric bell with his toe, summoning Jake to give the number of the "bloomin' 'orspital." But a mere chance, an almost improbable possibility entered his mind, and he dropped his foot.

Was she, by any chance, as impatient to explain as he to have the explanation?

He crossed the hall, and took down the receiver.

"Hullo!"

"Are you there?" asked the Kind Voice, instantly.

CHAPTER XVII

"COME TO ME!"

"NOT only here," said Steele, "but here with an apology."

"Wait," said the Kind Voice. "Mine comes first. Will you forgive me for ringing off so suddenly last night, just as you had entrusted me with so important and thrilling a secret?"

"It is I who should ask forgiveness," Steele hastened to say, as she paused, listening. "I had no right to trap you into giving me a candid opinion of my own book, by allowing you to suppose that I had merely read and not written it. You were entirely justified in ringing off. I am ashamed to have deceived you."

"I do not call that deceiving," said the Kind Voice. "You had a perfect right to continue to keep your identity from me. I had no claim to know it."

"As a matter of fact," said Rodney, "it is not my identity. 'Max Romer' is a pseudonym."

"Well, you have a perfect right to shield yourself behind your *nom-de-guerre*. Your remarks gave me a false impression. I do not call that 'deception.'"

"It depends," said Rodney, "to whom the false impression is given, rather than upon the impression itself."

She laughed—the sweet, low laugh so like Madge's.

"Oh my friend, this goes too deep for the telephone! And so does most of that which I have to say to you to-night. I have finished *The Great Divide*."

"One minute!" said Rodney. "If my duplicity had not disgusted you, why did you ring off?"

"Simply because the room suddenly went round with me. My table began to sway to and fro, and to recede into darkness. I thought I had better ring off, while I could still see the telephone. I recovered after a short rest upon the floor! I suppose I was over-tired. Perhaps *The Great Divide* had been too much for me. And then to be told, with the utmost suddenness, that my bold criticisms of a book, which I really hugely admire, had been made to its author! A stronger than I, might have fainted—Max Romer."

"I hate to think of you feeling ill, and being alone," said Rodney, impulsively.

"My maids had gone to bed. Remember it was after twelve. You are responsible for much burning of midnight oil—Max Romer."

There was a gentle raillery in her tone, each time she used his pseudonym, which awakened in Rodney an almost irresistible desire to trust her with his real identity. Yet he curbed the wish. For Madge's sake he must run no risk of being identified with Max Romer.

"So you have finished *The Great Divide*," he said.

"I have."

"What do you think of the end?"

"Am I to tell the honest truth?"

"Of course."

"Oh, I don't know how to bear the end! The utter hopelessness, the desolation; the 'just too late,' which is so much worse than if the delay and hesitation had been the work of years; the poor dead beasts lying around—emblems of his strong, great passion, slain. The lurid sunset, which tells of her torment, when she shall awake to the knowledge of what a man's love really means, and when she shall realise that—owing to her folly and inexperience—she has lost him.

Finally—the strong man, standing motionless upon a rock, his arms folded across his breast, a lonely sentinel amid the ruins; death and desolation all around; fighting the hardest of all fights —for the woman he loved had given herself to another man on that very day! It leaves one with a sense of hopelessness too sad for words. It might have been borne, as an episode; it does not do as the end."

"It was the only possible end, from the artistic point of view," explained Rodney, in defence of his position.

"The artistic point of view," said the Kind Voice, "is important to a novelist, I grant. But it is not the most important thing of all."

"What do you consider the most important thing of all?"

"The thing of first importance is to uplift your readers; to raise their ideals; to leave them with a sense of hopefulness, which shall arouse within them a brave optimism such as inspired Browning's oft-quoted, noble lines:

'God's in His heaven—
All's right with the world!'

A great French savant has said: 'The only excuse for fiction is if it be more beautiful than fact.'

Rodney hesitated. There was a side of him which would have dashed round to her at once, without further parley; wild for the adventure; madly keen to see her.

But there was another side, which was strong, and faithful, and steady; the man's firm grip upon the boy in his own nature.

The silence remained unbroken, while he paused, considering.

At last he said, quietly: "Are you there?"

"Yes," answered the Kind Voice, very softly. "I am here."

"You are too good to me," said Rodney. "I do not deserve so great an honour as the trust you place in me. I hope I may always prove worthy of your confidence and friendship. But I should fail that trust if I came to you without telling you two things. First, that my eager wish to hear you speak again, after that first call, was chiefly because your voice is more like the voice of the girl I loved, than any I have heard since last I heard her speak. Secondly, that she is Katherine in *The Great Divide*, and that—though she failed me and left me, as Katherine failed and left Val—I can never cease to love her. While life lasts, to no other woman could I ever give the love which has been always, wholly hers. For

years that love has been as a dead thing, shrined. But, such as it is, it is the only love I shall ever know, or ever have, to give."

He was not sure whether it was a sob or a laugh which reached him down the telephone. But the Kind Voice had lost its firmness, and sounded tremulous, as she answered.

"My friend—oh, my dear friend—I quite understand! And, listen! Your voice reminded me of the man I loved. So we are quits! For the rest, have I not told you that I am a widow—for over a year, I have been a widow. And I have never really loved but one man in my whole life. My heart belongs to him, and to none other, until death; and, I trust, after. Now—will you come?"

"Of course I will come, and come without delay," cried Rodney, gaily. "At last we shall talk without the chaperonage of Exchange! But tell me for whom to ask."

"You need not ask at all. Just ring the bell of No. 34. My maid will show you straight into the drawing-room. I am alone."

"Right!" said Rodney, and rang off; then laughed aloud; partly because he had used Jake's word; partly because his blood danced with a glad excitement. He was going actually to see the owner of the kind voice, the "widow of a

certain age," who had somehow come to mean to him all that was gracious, beautiful and consoling in womanhood. He would sit down in her sweet presence, and she would tell him how his book should have ended!

He did not wait for the lift.

He ran down the flights of stone stairs.

But he took the lift at the other staircase, lest he should walk into her drawing-room, seeming hurried or breathless.

Glad expectation was in his eyes, as he stepped from the lift at the second floor, and rang the bell of No. 34.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BETTER ENDING

A MAID answered his ring, and Rodney Steele found himself in a hall not unlike the hall in Billy's flat.

"Her ladyship is in the drawing-room, sir," said the maid, opening a door which corresponded to Billy's dining-room.

Steele passed in, and the door closed behind him.

A screen was drawn across the doorway. The room was illumined by the soft golden glow of many shaded lights.

Steele passed round the screen.

At the farther end of the room a fire burned on a low hearth.

In an easy chair beside the fire, reclined a tall woman in a black evening gown, which fell around her in soft folds.

His first view of her did not reveal her face, for she was reading, and holding up her book so that the light behind her should fall upon its pages.

But he saw, above the book, a crown of soft brown hair, and marked the grace of her long limbs, and the firm whiteness of her hands. She was a younger woman than he had expected to see.

He crossed the room, and stood before her, his step making no sound on the thick pile of the carpet.

The book she was holding, trembled in her hand; yet she seemed unaware of his presence.

"Well?" he said. "I have come to hear the better ending."

Then she laid down the book, rose to her feet, and stood before him.

Steele fell back a pace, in blank amazement; for he found himself looking into the beautiful face of the woman he had loved and lost, so long ago.

"Madge!" he said. "Madge! Is it you?"

"Yes, Roddie, it is I," said the Kind Voice—the voice he had all along thought so like Madge's—but now it was low and tremulous with deep emotion. She held out both hands to him. "Oh, Roddie! Is not this a better ending?"

But Rodney Steele, white, stern, amazed, fell back from her, yet another pace.

"Lady Hilary," he said; "how can it be you? How come you to be here? On the 26th of

November, you were in Simla. I read of the birth of your boy. 'At Simla, on November the 26th, to Lord and Lady Hilary—a son.' How come you to be here; holding out your hands—to me; and calling yourself a widow?"

She laughed—the sudden uncontrollable laughter of tense emotion; of nerves strained to their uttermost.

"Oh, Roddie dear! Don't stand looking at me like some stern accusing angel barring the way to paradise! I don't 'call' myself a widow, dear. I *am* a widow. I have been a widow for over a year. Did you not know it, Rodney? Oh, you *did* know it! You told Billy you had seen it in the papers."

"I told Billy nothing of the kind. The day I landed, five minutes before Billy came in, I had seen in a daily paper: 'At Simla, on November the 26th, to Lord and Lady Hilary—a son.' Billy said there was something about you which I ought to know; and I said I had already seen it in the paper. Nothing more passed."

"Oh, Rodney, what a misunderstanding! Poor old Billy was doing his best, but he did make a mess of it. Didn't he? He was to make sure you knew of—of what happened fourteen months ago; and he came round here to me, and told me

you said you had seen it in the papers. It was an unfortunate instance of cross questions and crooked answers, wasn't it?" She laughed again, rather tremulously. "But anyway, dear, you know the truth now. You know that the woman who holds out both hands to you, Rodney—the love of her whole heart within them—is as free as was the girl who was so foolish, ten years ago, as to thrust from her, with both hands, the happiness which lay within her grasp. Rodney, she soon awoke to her mistake. Through all these long weary years, the deepest depth of her love has always been faithfully yours. Oh, my dearest, may I really believe what you said to me just now on the telephone—that you have never ceased to love me; that your love has also always been wholly mine?"

Steele passed his hand over his eyes, as if trying to dispel a mist, or to adjust a blurred and indistinct vision.

"I—I said nothing to *you* on the telephone, Lady Hilary. I spoke to a woman whom I had never seen, whose name I did not know, who did not know my name; a woman whom I trusted; in whom, for some reason for which I could not account, I placed implicit confidence. I was not speaking to you—Lady Hilary."

He stood before her, very erect, stern, and relentless.

Then, suddenly, he groaned, and put out his hand, feeling for something to grip and lean against.

The woman who loved him, loved him enough to put him first, relegating her own feelings to the background. She saw he was suffering; though, as yet, she realised but dimly why.

"Sit down, Rodney," she said. "Take the chair opposite to mine. Now let us have a quiet talk together, and all will come right. Billy's mistake cannot make any real difference between you and me. Ask me anything you like, and I will answer, and, if possible, explain. The one essential fact, which nobody can take from us, is that you and I are sitting here together, on either side of the fire—the wall of partition gone; that we can say what we will to each other; and that nobody in the whole world has any claim upon either of us, or any right to come between us. I am content, just now, to sit still and realise this."

She lay back in her chair, purposely not looking at him, but into the warm glow of the fire. She knew he must be free to look at her, unobserved, if that strained, bewildered, almost horrified expression was to pass from his eyes.

She lifted a hand-screen, and fanned herself with it, gazing steadily into the fire.

Rodney clenched his hands upon the arms of his chair, and looked at her.

He saw the girl he had loved, grown to full womanhood. The face, which had been soft and flowerlike in girlhood, now held a perfect loveliness of which then there had been but the radiant promise. The large hazel eyes were luminous and tender; the lips, mobile and sweet, and ready to curve and part in smiles and laughter, closed firmly, when at rest, in lines of quiet self-control. The beautifully moulded chin denoted strength of will, the broad white brow gave an appearance of thoughtful intellectuality. It was the face of a woman who had lived and suffered, yet whose suffering had left her, not embittered, but sweet, calm, and patient, with an infinitely pathetic patience; a look of having endured a hard present, because those sweet eyes had been ever fixed upon something high and beautiful, beyond.

There was a gracious gracefulness about her every movement, a calm assurance, denoting one accustomed to rule and to be obeyed; that indescribable air of the woman of the world, who rules by virtue of her position, of her grace, and of her beauty; who is never at a loss as to what to

do next; who knows the right thing to say, and says it.

As she lay back now, slowly fanning herself, in the firelight, Steele knew that she intended him to speak next; that the silence would not be broken, until he broke it. It might last an hour; but the next word spoken would have to be his.

He firmly closed his lips. Why should he speak? He had nothing to say, as yet; he—who had been trapped into saying so much already.

How tall she was. Her figure had kept its graceful lines, though developed into complete maturity. The soft folds of her black gown accentuated the whiteness of her skin; her only ornament, a string of perfect pearls around her neck. Hilary's wedding-ring gleamed on the third finger of the hand which lay so still upon the arm of her chair.

The slow movement of her fan maddened Rodney.

A sudden wild impulse seized him, to fling himself at the feet of this lovely woman, lay his head upon her knees, and put his arms around her.

In self-defence he spoke.

"Lady Hilary——"

She raised her hand in protest.

"Not that!" she said. "It is the one thing

I cannot bear from you, Roddie. If you can't call me 'Madge,' call me nothing."

"I don't know what to say, Madge. I don't know where to begin. I have to readjust all my ideas. Will you try to realise that for years I have been schooling myself, when I thought of you, to think always of you as belonging to another man. It takes a lot of—readjusting."

"There is no hurry, dear. We, who have waited so long, can wait yet longer."

"I have not waited," he said. "I had nothing to wait for. You took all from me. I had not a hope or an ideal left."

She fanned on, gently; ignoring his interruption.

"And as for not knowing where to begin, begin just where we are, Rodney. Let me help you to readjust. Ask me any questions you like."

"How came that notice in the paper: 'To Lord and Lady Hilary—a son'?"

"It referred to the present Lord and Lady Hilary. Gerald's younger brother acted as his secretary. During the latter years, he really did most of the work. Gerald was—well, incapacitated. At Gerald's death he not only came into the title, but was at once given Gerald's post. He and his wife took the house and furniture and everything, off my hands. I came home alone,

with just my own private possessions. The cause of Gerald's death was hushed up as much as possible. Details were kept out of the papers. Paragraphs concerning Lord and Lady Hilary appeared as usual; but they had reference to Tom and his wife, not to Gerald and me. It is fourteen months since a line about me has been in any paper. I came quietly back alone; took this flat, and a cottage in the country, settled down, and—waited."

"Waited?"

"Yes, Roddie; waited."

"For what?"

She slowly turned her head, and looked at him. He was not making things very easy. But her eyes were full of a tender patience.

"For you to come home, dear."

"What made you suppose I should come home?"

"You had told Billy you expected to be back at the end of this year; and I knew it was a promise that, when you did return, you would come to Billy's flat."

"Did you know I was coming, on the day when I arrived?"

"Did I know? Oh, Roddie! I was watching at the window for a first sight of you. Do you remember the heavy fog, hanging overhead? I

put out all the lights, and stood leaning against the window-frame, half hidden by the curtain. I saw you get out of the taxi, turn to pay the driver, and look up at a window where some one was tapping. For a moment you glanced, with unseeing eyes, at me. My whole heart went out in welcome."

Steele looked at her. There was anger in his eyes.

So he had been cheated of this welcome, which would have meant so much to him.

He remembered the motherly little lady in furs and violets, at the station, running with open arms to meet the returning schoolboy. "Welcome, my dearest boy! Ah, what it means to have you back!"

He remembered the man who had leapt from the other taxi and gone up with him in the lift, to be met in his doorway with a rush of greeting. "Welcome, my dearest, welcome!" he had heard that other woman say. "These ten days have seemed ten years to me. Ah, it is good to have you back!"

With this atmosphere of welcome all around him, how sore his heart had been, because he had come back, and there was none to welcome him.

And all the while she had stood, watching

and waiting, behind a curtain, at a darkened window.

His eyes were sombre. He had been cheated.

"Then you knew I was next door, in Billy's flat?"

"Of course I knew. I had been in to see that all was comfortable. I had laid my hand upon the back of the library chair, where I knew your head would rest. I had dropped a kiss upon your pillow, Roddie. Of course I knew!"

"Did Billy know you knew?"

"Billy? Why, yes. When he left you, he came straight in here and reported; told me just how you looked, and what you said. But what you said, Rodney, was not very promising. Still I knew you would not wear your heart upon your sleeve, even for good old Billy to see; so I would not be too much discouraged. It seemed enough happiness for one night, to know you safely just on the other side of the wall."

She paused, hoping for some response. As none was forthcoming, she continued:

"Next day I had glimpses of you as you went out and came in; but, by evening, I wanted more. I yearned to hear your voice. Only the wall between us; I on one side, you on the other; yet I could not hear your voice. If I could but bid

you 'good-night,' and have a 'good-night' from you! It was ten years since you and I had said 'good-night' to one another.

"Then, suddenly, my eye fell on the telephone. I remembered what Billy had told me of people ringing up his number and asking for the hospital. I thought there was just a chance that, if I rang up, you, yourself, would answer. It was only just once to hear your voice, Roddie. I did not think it would lead to more; and Billy had told me that you believed me to be still in India.

"I rang up; and, in another minute, we were talking together—you and I! It seemed so strange and sweet to say 'good-night' again, and with only the wall between."

Again she paused, fanning herself slowly, and gazing steadily into the fire.

Still, no response from the silent man in the chair opposite.

"I had no thought of ringing you up again," she continued, after waiting a few moments in case he wished to speak. "But, on the following evening, at exactly the same hour, while I was playing the 'Träumerei,' an irresistible impulse came over me to do so. It seemed almost like something outside myself, a call I could not ignore, a bidding I could not disobey. I had

given your number before I realised that I could not again ask for the hospital. Then it occurred to me that I might ask you to repeat the new number; and then—oh, Rodney—you know the rest. This wonderful thing happened. You, yourself, proposed our telephone friendship. You made me promise to ring you up each evening. You needed me. In your loneliness you turned to me. Ah, how gladly I promised; yet how carefully I had to keep the gladness out of my voice, lest you should guess. You nearly caught me out, that first time, after you had told me to say: 'Are you there?' I thought you had rung off; and I said the words, just to hear how lovely they would sound; and almost—almost, I said: 'Are you there, my Roddie?'"

She paused again, smiling into the fire. When she smiled there was a dimple in the cheek he could see best; a dimple he remembered long ago.

"And it has been so sweet, Rodney, to know that each day you counted on the time when I should ring up, saying: 'Are you there?' But now it is no longer 'Are you there?' for you are here!"

She did not say—this woman who loved him—how bitterly he was disappointing her. She did not say how she had counted upon this first meet-

ing, dreaming of all it must surely mean. She just said: "You are here," with a sweet, quiet joy; as though the fact of his near presence was meaning to her all she had hoped. She did not tell him that she had expected "You are here," to mean his strong arms around her, his words of love outpoured.

A long silence followed. Then in the stillness they heard distant chimes. They both glanced at the mantelpiece. The clock was chiming the quarter after ten.

"I cannot bring myself to realise," said Rodney, huskily, "that you are the Kind Voice."

She rose at once, went over to her writing-table, on which stood the telephone, drew up a chair and, sitting down, lifted the receiver.

"494 Mayfair, please," she said.

She sat and waited; her elbow on the table, the receiver in her hand.

Rodney marked the glint of gold in her beautiful hair, as she bent slightly forward toward the light.

Then: "Are you there?" she said, clearly. Yes, it was indeed the Kind Voice. . . . "Out? Oh, very well. Thank you. . . . No; there is no message. I will ring up to-morrow. . . . Good-night."

Replacing the receiver, she returned to her chair.

"There, Roddie! Now you have seen exactly where I sat, and how I rang you up each evening."

Rodney got up, and stood on the rug, with his back to the fire. He towered above her, as she sat looking up at him. How well she remembered his habit of always standing, when he had anything important to say.

"I have seen," he said, slowly, "exactly how I was deceived and taken in; but I have yet to hear why this deception was considered necessary."

She sat up, with a quick movement of protest, flushing painfully, as she answered.

"Oh, Roddie! Are not 'deceived' and 'deception' rather hard words to use?"

"Not at all," said Rodney. "I was trapped into talking to you, believing you to be a complete stranger, as ignorant of my name as I was of yours. Do you think a man likes to be fooled and deceived? You began with a prevarication. Did you want to speak to the Matron of the Metropolitan Emergency Hospital? You went on with another. Did you want to make a note of the new number of the hospital? All through, you fooled and deceived me; and the fact that it was you—you, Madge, of all people in the world

—makes it worse instead of better. Did Billy know of this telephone business?"

"No, Rodney. Nobody knew of it."

"But Billy knew I was to be kept in ignorance of the fact that you were living in the same building?"

"Yes; Billy knew that."

"Anyone else?"

"Billy's wife was asked not to mention me, if she saw you."

"Anyone else?"

"Oh, Roddie, the Jakes knew that nothing was to be said about me, until you and I had met. Dear, I am sorry you mind so much. Can't you understand that it seemed to me impossible to meet you again, with all the tragedy of sorrow and parting, and lost years, which lay between us, without first finding out something of what your feelings were about it—about me? I feared that if we once met in an ordinary way, we might drop into an ordinary friendship, and neither of us have the courage to break it down. I wanted just to wait a little; to go carefully; to try to meet under the best and easiest circumstances; not to be hurled at each other's heads, by some well-meaning but tactless hostess. Had the telephone friendship not chanced to happen, I should prob-

ably have written to you, asking you to come and see me here. But in that case, Rodney, I could not have been free to show you my heart, because I should not have known yours. Now you have told me yours, in all its perfect faithfulness of enduring, abiding love; and, however much I have angered you by what appears to have been a mistake, you cannot take from me the words you spoke only an hour ago. I cling to them; and I tell you, without shame or fear, that I, also, love you, wholly. While life lasts I could never give to another man, the love which has been always, wholly yours."

"I did not say that to *you*," said Rodney, sullenly. "I said it to the unknown owner of the kind voice—a woman I entirely trusted. I did not say it to a woman who was deceiving me."

"Dear, if you did not say it *to* me, you said it *of* me. Cannot you forgive a mistake brought about by a great love; a mistake which was intended to ensure your happiness? As great a love as ours, has done this before, to work out the same end."

"I know of whom you are thinking," said Rodney. "But I am not made like that. Some men may not resent having been fooled, if love has done the befooling. I do. That's all."

"Very well," she said rather wearily, yet with infinite patience. "Let us leave it at that. If I have committed the unpardonable sin, I must take the consequences. Only—so far as I am concerned—I shall not allow so poor a thing as pride, to come between you and me. Don't you think you might sit down now, and talk of other things? There is so much else we have to say to-night."

He sat down at once, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands, staring into the fire.

As she watched him, a great tenderness stirred in her heart. She realised how much of the child there is, in even the strongest man.

Presently: "Rodney," she said, "we have to talk of *The Great Divide*. How came you to write it?"

CHAPTER XIX

THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT

RODNEY STEELE looked up quickly, at Lady Hilary's question. Into his eyes sprang the sudden immense relief of being able at last to speak freely and without reserve.

He returned to his steady contemplation of the fire, but his whole attitude relaxed and became more friendly.

"Great bitterness of soul drove me to it," he said, slowly. "All I had suffered, through the breaking off of our engagement, ate into my life like a canker. I don't think I meant to publish it, at first. I simply felt that if I could fling it on to paper, I should get some relief. Then, when it was written, I saw I had at last done the real thing. Into all my other stories I had put love-making in which I did not, myself, believe; often I wrote of love with levity, and of marriage in mockery; yet people took me seriously, and called it the 'love-interest' in my books.

"At last, in writing our own tragedy, I found I had done the real thing. It was true to life, and I knew it. I sent it in, under another name. I did not know it would make such a hit. I hoped you would come across it some day, and realise the truth, and know what I had suffered. Madge —why do you say Katherine's throwing over of Val as she did, is not true to life? You, of all women in the world, know that it is."

She turned upon him eyes which were grave and sad, full of a wondering question.

"Why did not you write the truth, Rodney?" she asked.

"I did," he said. "Of course, I had to change the setting and circumstances. I made it a hunting accident, instead of a crack in South Africa. And I made her a nurse in a nursing-home in England. Of course, really, she followed me home from South Africa, as soon as she heard of our engagement. There was no love in it, Madge, on her part. She was out for what she could get. It was money she wanted—nothing more. I believe she knew, all along, that I was off my chump when I wrote those fool letters."

"Had you really forgotten them completely, Roddie?"

Absolutely. I shall never forget the horror

of taking that letter out of your hand, reading it, recognising my own handwriting, yet not having the faintest recollection of having written one line of it. It was a ghastly experience. I think it was because I was so bowled over by the fact of it, that I didn't stand up to you about it in her presence. My one idea was to get the woman, and the letters, and myself too, for that matter, out of your sight as quickly as possible. I walked off with her, knocked all of a heap, hardly knowing where I was, or who I was, or what to believe. I little thought I should not see you again." He lifted sombre eyes to hers. "Why would you not see me, Madge, or even look at my explanation?"

"I did not dare to do so, Roddie."

"Did not dare? That was queer. Would it not be more honest to say you were too proud?"

"I do not think I was proud, Roddie. I know I was heart-broken. What happened next?"

"Next? Why, she merely wanted money. I bought her off. But the first thing I did, to get my own mind settled, was to go straight to Brand and ask him what it all meant. He has specialised in these cases. He was most awfully kind and helpful. He said cerebral hæmorrhage often produced temporary loss of memory—wiping out

the happenings of days or weeks or even months, especially when immediate rest and care and proper treatment had not been possible. He gave me a signed certificate that in his opinion, under the conditions of which I told him, I was not in the least responsible for anything I had written at that time. This I enclosed in the letter to you, which was returned to me unopened."

"Oh, Roddie!" she moaned. "My poor Roddie!"

"After my visit to Wimpole Street I went back to the woman, showed her the doctor's certificate, told her her game was up and that she must hand over the letters. This she refused to do, and threatened to bring an action for breach of promise, and to drag your name into it. Of course I couldn't have that, at any price. I was young, remember, and alone. I had nobody to advise me. I sold up all I had, paid her down the sum she demanded to keep her mouth shut, got the letters and a signed receipt out of her, saying all claims were settled. Then, as you would have nothing more to do with me, Madge, I went off abroad with what was left of my cash; and I've been a wanderer ever since. It worked out for good so far as my career was concerned, but it hit me pretty hard in other ways."

"What became of the woman?" asked Lady Hilary.

"Of her? Oh, she went back to the Transvaal. I daresay she married a farmer out there, and has lived happy ever since!"

"Then you felt justified in not marrying her?" asked Lady Hilary, shading her face with her hand.

"Good heavens, yes!" said Steele. "Why on earth should you suppose I should have dreamed of marrying her?"

"Because she told me all, Rodney."

"Told you WHAT?"

"She told me that you *must* marry her; that by all laws of honour, she was your wife, already; that if I kept you from her I should be doing untold wrong, not to her alone, but to another. Oh, Rodney, surely you knew she told me this! That is why *The Great Divide* is not true to life. I should never have sent you from me out of mere jealousy, pride, or vexation, because you had written foolish love-letters to another woman. But, if she was already your wife, in all but name, it seemed to me, in my youth and inexperience, that to keep you for myself would be a crime. A year later, I was ten years older. I understood life better; I had learnt some of its hard lessons. I

knew that two wrongs do not make a right, and that a loveless marriage is, perhaps, the worst sin of all. But I was young and inexperienced when, in my horror and misery, I sent you from me."

She spoke very low, shading her face, and not looking at the man before her. But when he suddenly rose to his feet, she looked up, and her heart stood still at what she saw.

Murder was in Steele's face. His fury was the more terrible, that it was inarticulate. He clenched and unclenched his big hands, looking wildly round for something out of which he could crush the life.

Lady Hilary stood up instantly, and faced him.

"Don't!" she said. "Oh, Rodney, don't!" He stared at her, in dumb misery.

"Speak to me, Rodney! Never mind what you say, but say something! Hurt me if it will help you. But, oh, my dear, don't suffer as you are suffering now!"

Still speechless, he turned from her, with a groan, and walked over to the window.

He flung aside the curtain, and stood looking down into the street below, his forehead pressed against the glass.

In the tense silence of the room, the little clock

upon the mantelpiece seemed suddenly to start ticking with painful loudness.

The rumble of the passing traffic came up from below, as something sinister and threatening.

The hoot of speeding motors seemed to hold a jeering menace.

Silently Lady Hilary sat down again, and waited.

Neither could have said whether minutes passed, or hours.

At last she heard him draw the curtain back across the window.

He came and sat down in the chair opposite hers, leaned forward, and looked full into her eyes.

"It was an absolute lie, Madge," he said. "There was not a vestige of truth in it."

"Oh, Rodney!" she whispered. Then, as they looked into one another's grief-stricken faces, the ten long hard years rose between them, the remembrance of all they had suffered—he in loneliness, she in worse than loneliness; and the tragedy of it seemed beyond words.

Once she whispered: "Rodney, are you sure? You did not—as with the letters—forget?"

And he answered: "Absolutely certain. Besides, I can prove it by the paper she signed saying my payment satisfied all claims. Her wretched claims were specifically mentioned. Oh, Madge,"

he cried, with sudden violence, "I will never forgive that woman! If she had been in this room to-night, I believe I should have broken every bone in her body."

"I know you would, my poor old boy. I saw it in your face, and it terrified me. But breaking her poor wretched body, would not have mended our happiness. And, Roddie, though she came between us and wrought havoc in our lives, she could not rob us of our love. Cannot we take comfort from that fact? And this terrible revelation, if we look at it rightly, has done a beautiful thing for you and me, Rodney. It has lifted from each a cause of reproach. I now know that my lover was guilty of nothing more, than of writing a dozen foolish letters; and that, even for this, he was not morally responsible. And you now realise that I did not send you from me merely out of pique or jealousy or foolish pride, but because I had been deceived into believing that I had no right to hold you to me. And through it all, our love has stood. Roddie, we aren't so very old! I am twenty-nine; you are thirty-seven. All the best of life lies before us still."

She smiled across at him, a little wistfully. "Can't we help each other to forget past sadness in a new-found joy?"

Rodney got up, leaned his shoulders against the mantelpiece, looking beyond her as he answered, with trouble in his eyes:

"I hate to say it, Madge, but—it comes too late for me. I am afraid I don't want now, what I wanted so desperately ten years ago. I've got into the way of living a free, roving life, and I hold to my world-wide liberty—here to-day, off to-morrow; consulting no man, beholden to nobody. 'I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.' I am no good for anything else now. I have nothing to offer, worthy of your acceptance—you, who deserve the very best a man could give. I must just go my own way, and do my own work—and even that isn't up to much," he added, with a rueful smile. "For, after all, you see, the critics were right. *The Great Divide* isn't true to life."

She answered bravely, though she was beginning to wonder how much more she could bear: "Don't let that discourage you, Roddie. There will always be plenty of people to maintain that Katherine could not have done otherwise. You wrote of life as you believed it to be. And, you see, you were right in saying that yours was the only possible ending. Now I am afraid I must really send you away."

He stood looking down upon her. A haunting regret was in his eyes.

"Madge, may I ask you one question?"

"You may ask me anything you wish, Rodney."

"Why did you marry Hilary?"

"I did him a great wrong," she answered, gravely, "though I admit I did it without in the least realising how great a wrong it was; also I atoned for it by nine years of endurance, without once uttering a reproach. I married Gerald because I could not trust myself, if I remained free, not to call you back. It was a wrong to him, but truly I did it in ignorance; and, afterwards, I was the chief sufferer."

She rose and moved to the middle of the room.

"Roddie, we must say good-bye. I cannot let you stay longer."

"Good-bye?" he said. "Is it for another ten years, Madge?"

"That is as you will, dear. I shall be here; you will know I am here, if you want me. I have done you one great wrong. Not until to-night, did I know how great. Please God, I shall never do you another. No pride or pain of mine shall spoil your life again, my dearest. Had you wanted me, I was here. As you do not need me, I do not ask you to stay. At least this night's meeting

has not been in vain, for now no misunderstanding remains between us. Good-night, Roddie. I am afraid you must let yourself out. We keep early hours in my little household."

She held out her hand, with a smile of gentle dismissal.

Rodney stood before her, humbled, half-ashamed, yet honest.

"Madge," he said, "I can't shake hands. I'm awfully sorry. Don't think me a brute. I feel one, after all your great goodness to me. But—if I shook hands"—his voice grew husky—"if I attempted to shake hands, that wouldn't be all. If I touched you, Madge, I couldn't go."

"I know you couldn't, dear," she said. "I understand. We won't shake hands. Good-night."

She moved to the fireplace and stood with her back to him, looking down into the faint glow of the dying embers.

He got out of the room, somehow.

The door of the flat closed behind him.

He felt as if that clang—of his own making—cut him off for ever from Madge.

He paused outside.

Could he go? After all, could he go? He wanted her so desperately; yet he did not want

to live for her. Every fibre of his being ached for her; yet he knew he could not put her first. He had got into the way of living to himself alone, and he felt like Esau, who after he had sold his birthright, "when he would have inherited the blessing, found no way to change his mind, though he sought it carefully with tears."

Rodney stood quite still, outside the door of Lady Hilary's flat, fighting out this battle with himself.

He could not offer that glorious woman a second best, yet he had no best to offer. He would not yield to a physical need of her, which was not equalled by a mental desire.

While he waited, motionless, a hand within, quietly put up the chain and double-locked the door.

He tried to call her name. No sound would pass his lips.

He tapped on the panel of the door; but she had evidently moved away.

He turned and walked slowly down the stairs. He had received his answer.

He let himself in, with a latch-key, to Billy's flat.

The Jakes had evidently gone to bed, after making up the fire. It all looked very cosy; it all felt utterly desolate.

He walked over to the telephone, and stood gloomily regarding it.

It was the telephone which had spoilt everything. He had not been able to pull round from the shock of having been deceived, the mortification of having been fooled.

He had a miserable idea that if it had not been for that, all might have been different. Now—it was too late.

Well, it was no good to stand there, cursing the telephone.

He ignored Jake's careful arrangement of sandwiches and whisky and soda. He felt too wretched, and savage, and sick at heart, even for a pipe.

He seemed to have lost everything. He had lost the Kind Voice, and the interest of the telephone friendship. He had lost Madge. He had lost faith in *The Great Divide*. This, in his present mood, was perhaps the hardest blow of all.

He went to bed, and lay tossing in the dark.

Madge was on the other side of the wall, thinking him an ungrateful brute; Madge, who had waited for his return, who had been ready with a welcome. She had even been into Billy's flat—into this very room—to make sure that all was ready for him.

Suddenly, in the darkness, he remembered something Madge had said. Then the boy in him, bounding away from the stern control of the man, gave a great leap.

He flung his arm over his pillow, turned with a deep sigh of relief, and buried his face in its softness.

He must have found there, what he sought; for, in two minutes, he was asleep.

CHAPTER XX

THE BISHOP'S WIDOW

THE bishop's widow handed Rodney his third cup of tea.

"Now tell me what steps you have taken to find this poor woman," she said, settling herself in her chair, and regarding him with an expression which betokened an expert knowledge of every possible step which could be taken, to inquire into the needs of the deserving poor.

"I have hunted high and low," said Rodney. "I started at the quiet corner where I met her the other night. I marched through all the adjacent streets; I searched the squares. I tried the churches, forgetting I was in London, where people are too busy for religion, excepting on Sundays. Had she been a Florentine widow, I should most certainly have found her resting in the sacred shadow of some old church portico. Being a London widow, even had she chanced upon a church which was open, an officious verger

would probably have told her to move on. I suppose it is the position given to the Madonna in the Roman Church, which makes it so tender to lonely women, so sure and safe a sanctuary for the forsaken and the desolate.

"I jostled through the crowds of Christmas shoppers in Oxford Street, Regent Street, and Piccadilly. I strolled in the moving procession up and down Bond Street. Everywhere I drew a blank. I got back, my pockets bulging with boxes of matches which I had bought of other match-sellers of whom I made inquiries; but not one of them had either seen her or heard of her.

"The only person I could find who had noticed her at all, was a crusty old chap with a broom, who sweeps a crossing at the very corner where I found her standing. She had hurried over his crossing, after I had walked on. He said she was still crying, and he heard her say: 'Home! Yes, it means home!' As she passed him she stopped, and gave him one of her boxes of matches. Imagine the delicacy of feeling which made one so poor as she, pause to pay the old curmudgeon's toll! He remarked that she was not in the profession, and spoke of her scornfully as a 'hammer-chewer.' I pocketed the sixpence I had ready,

and substituted a copper. I object to my pathetic, frayed widow being called a 'hammerchewer.'"

"Why do you call her the 'frayed widow'?"

"Because the adjective precisely describes her. She is too obviously respectable to be called respectable. If you say a person is really quite respectable, you imply that they might conceivably be supposed or expected to be otherwise. Nobody would think of calling you or me 'respectable,' because we are so, without question; at least you certainly are, and I hope I am. I consider 'respectable' a highly insulting adjective. I would sooner be called a hammerchewer."

The bishop's widow smiled.

"Nobody could call you that," she said. "And I think the Bishop would have agreed with you as to the other word. He was always most courteous to the poor, and most punctilious where their feelings were concerned. He was quite wonderful in finding out the really deserving and the really needy, and in knowing how best to help them. But the Bishop always refused to lend money. I well remember, on one occasion, when I had pressed him to lend instead of giving, he said: 'My dear, give if you can afford to do so; but never lend. Remember the old couplet:

'If you ever money lend,
You lose your money, and lose your friend.'

Do you know the adage, Mr. Steele?"

Rodney smiled.

"I know Shakespeare's version of it, Mrs. Bellamy."

"Shakespeare's version?"

"Perhaps I should have rather said, the passage from Shakespeare, of which it is a simplified and easily-remembered form."

"Has Shakespeare expressed the same idea?"

"When do any of us say anything which Shakespeare has not already said better? The lines occur in *Hamlet:*

'Neither a borrower nor a lender be;
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.'"

"Ah," said Mrs. Bellamy, "beautiful! And quite the same idea. The Bishop was a great student of Shakespeare. He undoubtedly knew the passage; but gave it to me in a form I should be certain to remember. Another instance of his constant thought and care for me."

Rodney was enjoying himself extremely, at tea

with the bishop's widow. In the atmosphere of her genuine appreciation, generously expressed, his self-confidence—rudely shaken by the happenings of the previous evening—was restored; her obvious pride and pleasure in the fact that he had so readily accepted the invitation to a tête-à-tête tea with herself, gratified him; and the almost affectionate manner toward himself, which her enthusiastic temperament suggested and her age permitted, warmed and comforted Rodney's sore heart, wrapping about him for the moment a sense of home.

He expanded beneath the influence of Mrs. Bellamy's kindly smile and admiring interest; talked delightfully of his travels and of his experiences in many lands, and modestly of himself and his books, when she insisted upon working back again and again to that subject; for Rodney's self-confidence never approached conceit.

The late bishop had enjoyed Rodney's stories, when away on his holidays, had appreciated the vigorous style in which they were written, the freshness of the descriptions, the accurate knowledge of the lands of which he wrote. He had read several of them aloud to Mrs. Bellamy, a thing he did only with books he considered really worth while. The memory of this made a personal

meeting with Steele an event of real importance to the bishop's widow.

To Rodney that afternooon's experience meant that, from the moment Prudence, the elderly parlourmaid, opened the door, asking him—with an old-fashioned smile of respectful welcome—to "step in," he stepped, at her bidding, into surroundings which awakened vivid memories of the beautiful old rectory, the home of his early childhood; of the parents he had lost, just when he most needed them; of the old creeds, beliefs, and habits of life, which he seemed to have put off with his sailor-suits, and left behind with his popgun and toy wheel-barrow.

Yet—the first seven years! Ah, the ineffaceable, ineradicable memories of those earliest years, cut deep into the plastic mind of a little child! Those who guide and mould the cutting, should remember they are graving for eternity, and cut high and holy things; things which are noble and true. Half a century hence, when much that has intervened has faded and been forgotten, the man of to-morrow will look back and remember—for good or for ill—the most passing things said to the child of to-day.

The flat Rodney entered at the bidding of Prudence, was more like a bishop's palace than

he would have imagined anything short of a bishop's palace could be.

The portraits on the walls, the library of valuable books, the magnificent old furniture, all still held the atmosphere of their former venerable setting.

Moreover, Rodney soon found that the spirit and tone of the saintly old bishop pervaded the place.

His bust stood in the hall, a benign smile upon the marble lips, a look of fine benevolence and of deep intellectuality upon the noble brow.

A life-size portrait, in his robes, dominated the dining-room, looking down in blessing from a central position over the mantelpiece.

Various photographs held places of honour in the drawing-room; and close beside the chair in which Mrs. Bellamy usually sat, a portrait in crayon stood upon an easel, a lifelike reminder of the bishop at home—simple, restful, intent upon a book; a strenuous thinker, peacefully reminiscent at eventide.

But to meet the bishop's widow, was to realise, at once, that his best memorial was in her devoted, tender memory. Almost her every sentence recorded his words, or expressed his opinions. To know her, was also to know the man whom she had

so loved and venerated. It has been said: "To live in the hearts of those we love, is not to die." If that trite saying be true, then most certainly the bishop was not dead.

"I have no desire to lend money to my frayed widow," said Rodney. "But I want to make sure that the 'house and home,' secured by the coin I gave her, is a permanent shelter. Also, I want to find out why a sovereign should have meant 'home' to her. The expression struck me as curious."

"Probably," said the bishop's widow, "she was to be turned out of rooms in which she was lodging, unless the rent was paid on that day."

"But that would have meant only a lodging," persisted Rodney, "not a permanency, not 'home.' I feel sure her outburst of thankfulness implied more than merely overdue rent, and I want to find out precisely what. Oh, it's not philanthropy! It is pure curiosity. It seems hard luck that I cannot find her. Just as I started out on my search this morning, in fact as I stood on the steps of our entrance debating which way to go, a motor glided past me. It had just started from the next entrance, on the left. In it was seated a charming widow—I know her to be a widow, though her get-up was most unwidowlike. She

was wearing black velvet and furs, and a bunch of lilies of the valley at her breast. She bowed to me and smiled, in passing; then her car glided into the stream of traffic, and disappeared at once from view. She had no need of me, or of anything I could give or do. Yet, will you believe it, twice in the course of my walk, I came across that car; once in the park, and once in Bond Street? Twice the beautiful wearer of lilies had the bother of bowing and smiling in my direction. It became quite embarrassing. Yet my frayed widow, to whom it might have meant so much that I should have found her, was nowhere to be seen. Such is life! She is a widow in need, and, therefore, what St. Paul would have called 'a widow indeed.'"

"Furs and lilies of the valley?" questioned Mrs. Bellamy, wrinkling her smooth brow. "And starting from next door? That sounds like Madge Hilary. She dropped in to see me at four o'clock, but would not stay to tea. I remember she was wearing lilies of the valley and black velvet, with a small fur toque on her pretty brown hair."

"It was Lady Hilary," said Steele.

"Ah, then how nearly you met her a third time! I told her you were coming to tea with

me in a few minutes, and asked her to stay in order to meet you. But she would not be persuaded. I know I had planned to have you to myself; but we should have enjoyed having her. She is a charming creature. I am very fond of Madge Hilary."

"I used to know her, years ago," said Steele.

"Before her marriage?"

"Yes, before her marriage."

"Ah, that was such a tragedy! You remarked just now that, in her furs and flowers, she looked unlike a widow. Well, I hold most strictly by widow's weeds; yet, I tell you frankly, I could not have blamed Madge Hilary had she not worn them at all. She must want to put all remembrance of those years out of her mind. Mr. Steele, that brave girl passed through ten years of veritable martyrdom."

"In what way?"

"Well, I don't know that I ought to give you details. Lord Hilary was a first cousin of my husband's; so we knew more than most people, of the miserable facts, which were kept more or less secret. He was already a victim of the drug-habit, even at the time of the marriage. I do not think the Bishop would have wished me to say more. Besides, it is over now. I think it made of

her the noble woman she is. Her patience and devotion were wonderful. We did not meet her until after her marriage to Gerald. Did you say you knew her in the old days?"

"Lady Hilary is a distant cousin of mine, Mrs. Bellamy. But, until yesterday, we had not met for ten years."

"Well, you must come and meet her here. She is a great admirer of your work. By the way, here is a book I have been reading lately which has much interested me. Do you know it? *The Great Divide*, by— Ah, find the name of the author for me, Mr. Steele! I have a bad memory for names, and for the moment I have mislaid my glasses."

Steele took the volume from her hands, and gravely opened it at the title-page.

"By Max Romer," he said. "Yes, I know the book well."

"Do you admire it?" asked the bishop's widow.

Rodney closed the book, and laid it on the table.

"I think the man says what he has to say, fairly forcibly. But the main incident is not true to life. So fine a character as he has drawn in Katherine, would not have dismissed her lover

merely because he had written a dozen crazy love-letters to some other woman. It would have taken a stronger reason than that to induce her to throw over Valentine, refuse to see him again, and so soon put between herself and him the impassable barrier of her marriage to another man."

"Ah, but I cannot agree with you there, my dear Mr. Steele! I think it was perfectly natural that a *nice* girl—a *really* nice girl—such as Katherine—should have acted exactly as she acted. She felt herself deceived; she thought that dreadful nurse had a prior claim, and that the only thing for her to do was to break off the engagement and give poor Val up. She could not know of the unfortunate effect of his accident."

"Do you consider that also possible?"

"I know it to be possible, by sad experience. The very same thing happened to the Bishop. Oh, not the love-letters! Dear me, no! But loss of memory from cerebral hæmorrhage. The Bishop was in our closed motor, with his chaplain. He had held two confirmations and an induction, and was somewhat tired. It was a long run home, over lonely country roads. The Bishop had removed his hat and was dozing. They reached a place where a small stream ran under the

road. There was a slight rise, which the chauffeur did not notice. He did not slacken speed to cross it, and the car leapt as they went over, flinging the Bishop violently up off the seat. He struck the top of his head on the roof of the car, and the blow caused cerebral hæmorrhage at the base of the brain. He was very ill during many weeks, and felt the after-effects for over a year. Not many people knew it, but he used to have what he called "blank days"—days when, in the evening, he could not recall any of the events of the day. As time went on, he merely had blank conversations—conversations which were wholly effaced from his mind immediately they had taken place. This tried the Bishop, greatly. But after a period of complete rest abroad—a time when we read several of your books, together—he fully recovered; only very occasionally having a blank moment, when overtired. But only those who have been through it, can understand the serious mental suffering which results from cerebral hæmorrhage."

"Then you like *The Great Divide*?"

"On the whole, I like it immensely. But I grieve over the ending. It is not right that any book should close in such hopeless gloom. And there is a bitterness in the sorrow, a total loss of

ideals—of belief in love—which is not calculated to help or to uplift the reader."

"It is life," said Rodney, gloomily. "Life tends to make a man lose faith in love."

"Ah, no!" exclaimed the bishop's widow, intense earnestness in her look and tone. "Not if life, with its joys and its sorrows, is approached in the right attitude of mind. May I tell you the Bishop's way of meeting all difficulties, sorrows, and perplexities?"

"Do tell me," said Rodney.

"He met them with his favourite text."

"What was his favourite text?" asked Rodney, gently.

The sweet face lighted, with a tender joy. She glanced at the crayon portrait beside her.

"'God is love,'" said the bishop's widow; then her voice suddenly failed.

"I know that text," put in Rodney, hurriedly, to give her time to recover from her emotion. "When I was a very small boy, my mother used to draw texts for me, and I used to prick them with a pin. And, later on, I painted a text every Sunday afternoon, and brought it down to her at tea-time. 'God is Love' was a great favourite, because it was so short. I can see it now, gaily smudged in blue, orange, and crimson.

I had a crimson paint in my box called 'lake.' I always wondered why that particular colour was called 'lake.'"

"It is short," said the bishop's widow, wiping her eyes. "Three little words, each of one syllable. Yet it holds the truth of greatest import to our poor world; and its right understanding readjusts our entire outlook on life, and should affect all our dealings with our fellow-men. The Bishop used to say to me: 'My dear, when you have to reprove a child, or to scold a servant, always begin by saying to yourself: "God is love."' I remember, on one occasion, seeing him walk across the lawn to speak to a young under-gardener who had been so insolent to the head man, and generally insubordinate in conduct, that we felt he must be dismissed. As the Bishop crossed the lawn, his lips moved, and I felt sure he was saying: 'God is love.' I do not know what passed in that interview; but the lad apologised to the head-gardener, was kept on, and became one of our most trusted and faithful servants."

The bishop's widow paused. Not knowing exactly what to say, Rodney said nothing. The three words did not mean anything at all to him, but he saw they meant very much to her.

He respected her sincerity, and valued her confidence.

His silence cannot have appeared unsympathetic, for presently Mrs. Bellamy continued:

"You were speaking of the sad happenings of life, being apt to cause loss of faith. I will tell you of a time through which we passed, when my husband's favourite text upheld us in sorrow and kept us from bitterness.

"It was many years before he was made a bishop. We were living in our first home together —a country parish in Surrey.

"We had three precious children, two girls and a boy—Griselda, Irene, and little Launcelot.

"Scarlet fever and diphtheria broke out in the village, a terrible epidemic, causing grief and anxiety in many homes. So much has been done, nowadays, to prevent the spread of infectious illness; but forty years ago these widespread epidemics were more frequent, and more fatal in their results.

"We were almost worn out with helping our poor people—nursing, consoling, encouraging.

"Then—just as the epidemic appeared to be abating—it reached our own happy home. Our darlings were stricken suddenly. Mr. Steele, we lost all three, within a fortnight. My little

Lancy was the last to go. When he died in my arms, I felt I could bear no more. Such utter depth of sorrow, seemed too much for the poor human heart.

"My husband took me out into the garden. It was a soft, sweet, summer's night. The sky was deep purple. The stars were bright, above us; the planets hung luminous. The night breeze blew gently about us. He took me in his arms, and stood long in silence, looking up to the quiet stars, while I sobbed upon his breast. At last he said: 'My wife, there is one rope to which we must cling steadfastly, in order to keep our heads above water, amid these overwhelming waves of sorrow. It has three golden strands. It will not fail us. "GOD—IS—LOVE."'

"The nursery was empty. There was no more patter of little feet; no children's merry voices shouted about the house. The three little graves in the churchyard bore the names, Griselda, Irene, and Launcelot; and on each we put the text, spelt out by the initials of our darlings' names: 'God is love.' And in our own heart-life we experienced the great calm and peace of a faith which had come through the deepest depths of sorrow, without losing hold of the sustaining certainty of the love of God."

Steele looked at the sweet, chastened face of the bishop's widow. As she spoke it was illumined by a peculiar radiance which seemed a shining out of some inner light, rather than a reflection of outer brightness. Sorrow, bereavement, loneliness, had left their mark, but had left no trace of bitterness.

The bishop's motto meant nothing to Rodney Steele. He did not believe in the truth it set forth. But he believed in the effect of a belief in that truth, on the mind and life of the bishop's widow.

In response to her confidences he talked to her, quietly, comprehendingly. He was deeply touched and impressed, and he let her know it.

When he rose, at length, to take his leave, he knew he had made a friend for life; a friend who would not fail him.

He held her hand in both his own, as he thanked her for her goodness to him.

"It is pleasant to remember that we live in the same building," she said. "You are just above me. We share the view of the plane-trees, the sunrise and the sunset; the quaint minaret-like tower of Marylebone Church."

"The Brownings' church," he said. "Have you read the 'Love Letters'?"

"Ah, yes," she answered. "I have, indeed! The Bishop and I read them together. Nothing in fiction can touch that love-idyl of two poet souls. But, tell me. Were they really married in Marylebone Parish Church? His Life mentions St. Pancras."

"I know," said Rodney. "But that is an unaccountable mistake. I have seen their signatures in the registers at St. Marylebone."

"Really?" she said. "How I should love to see them!"

"Will you let me take you?"

"Gladly."

"When?"

"The sooner the better."

"To-morrow, at twelve?"

"Yes, to-morrow at twelve o'clock would suit me, perfectly."

"Good! I will call for you."

She smiled a kind farewell.

As Rodney passed through the hall, the marble lips of the bishop seemed to smile on him in pleased approval. The benign look followed him in blessing.

Rodney went up the stairs to Billy's flat, thinking to himself: "I don't know as to the truth of the bishop's text; but, anyway, the bishop's

widow is love. She lives what she believes, and that certainly makes a belief worth having. I am glad Madge, also, has her for a friend."

CHAPTER XXI

RODNEY FACES THE SITUATION

RODNEY had not intended to spend that evening at home. After his second meeting with Madge, in Bond Street, he had turned into Keith, Prowse, and booked a seat at a place where he was likely to be amused, and where he would be given the least possible leisure for thought.

Yet nine o'clock found him quietly settled into his chair, with his pipe, wholly disinclined for the entertainment he had chosen, and resolved to face out the situation in which he now found himself placed.

When he had awakened, that morning, with the sudden return to consciousness which is apt to follow particularly sound slumber, it had seemed to him that the happenings of the evening before had been a vivid, but wholly impossible, dream. As he tubbed and whistled, dressed and shaved, he had repeated at intervals, as if to silence a haunting, growing certainty: "I have

had a fiendish dream; an altogether impossible, fiendish dream!"

But, with breakfast, came Jake's report of his having been rung up, on the previous evening, by a lady who said: "Are you there?" and when Jake had replied, informing her that Mr. Steele was out, had declined to give any message, saying she could ring up again to-morrow; "Meaning to-day," Jake had added; hastening, after the manner of his kind, to make the obvious, unmistakably clear.

Meaning to-day! "She could ring up again!" Perhaps she will? Ah, fool to hope it, knowing that she will not! He had indeed committed the unpardonable sin—that which no woman could ever forgive. He had turned from her generous offer of herself; and this rebuff he had given to the only woman he had ever really loved or desired.

He had driven himself out of Paradise. He had nobody else to blame; not even a lying serpent, this time. With his own hand he had pulled to the door, which, closing with a clang, kept him outside. The hand which afterwards put up the chain and double-locked the door within, did but acquiesce in his decision that he preferred to find himself outside.

He continued his mental review of the happenings of the morning.

He had breakfasted unusually early, and after breakfast had stood at the library window, waiting for the late sunrise, and aimlessly counting the little balls hanging from the gaunt branches of the plane-trees, in sooty bunches against the grey sky.

He had turned to the left and looked through into the bay-window of Madge's drawing-room where he stood during those ghastly minutes the night before, fighting the fierce desire to throttle, crush, and kill with his own hands.

For the first time since his arrival, the blinds in that window had been up. He had seen a corner of Madge's writing-table, upon which lay a round bevelled ruler. He had noticed that ruler the night before, and had resisted an impulse to snatch it up, in the first fury of his pain, and snap it across, as if it had been a mere dead twig broken from these branching plane-trees.

As he sat thinking in the firelight, his big brown hands clenched and unclenched themselves again.

Oh, damnable, blackmailing fiend! Forgive her? Never! He would curse her with the last breath he drew.

His impotent fury hurt him, so that he groaned aloud.

Then suddenly he remembered Madge's tender appeal to him to speak—to ease his own pain by words, even if those words were hard for her to hear. "Hurt me," she had said: "hurt me, if it will help you. But, oh, my dear, don't suffer as you are suffering now!"

Was that a woman's love?

Did she court pain herself, sooner than let the man she loved have it to bear?

He had turned away in silence, at the moment. Even in his frenzy of anger, he had realised that the words which came to his lips must not be spoken in her presence. But—had he spared her any pain later on? Had he said one single thing to make that hard talk easier for her? No, not one. All the courage, all the patience, all the tenderness, had been hers. He had blamed, reproached, and—finally—deserted her.

His anger died down; a sad compunction awoke within him.

He took up, once more, the thread of the events of the morning.

The grey sky had turned to pale lemon, between the chimney stacks. Then the fiery sun had appeared, huge at first, but growing smaller

as it rose, a round red ball, into the wintry sky.

And then—ah, then he had felt as a schoolboy might feel, caught trespassing—he had looked again toward the bay on the left, and there stood Madge, watching the sunrise.

There had been an ineffable calm about the pose of her graceful figure. The rising sun had shone on the coils of her brown hair. She had not turned her head or looked his way; but, whilst he watched, she had leaned her forehead against the pane, as he had leant his the night before.

Somehow she had seemed so remote from him —remote from any man.

He had grown hot with shame at the remembrance of his response to all she had said to him.

Turning quickly back into the room, he had vainly tried to settle to his work. The insistent need of rapid movement with some definite object in view, in order to keep his mind from dwelling upon himself and Madge, had driven him out on his fruitless quest after the frayed widow, which had resulted only in three rencontres with Lady Hilary.

How beautiful she had looked, seated alone in her car. Her smile for him, instantly following

the formality of her bow—a quick shaft of intimate friendliness—had been so simply and naturally given. Then, when she passed him again, and yet again, during her morning drive, she had dropped the bow, but the smile had gained in friendliness by the addition of a little gleam of amusement, so natural and spontaneous that it might have been a daily occurrence that he and she should meet and greet, and pass and go their ways.

Steele wondered whether chance meetings with Madge would become easier or more difficult, as time went on.

Well? If they became more difficult he could put an end to that complication at any moment. He was his own master, thank goodness, bound by nobody's whims, compelled to consider nobody's convenience save his own. He could leave London, England, or Europe for that matter, whenever he chose.

He wondered idly who had given her the lilies she was wearing. Billy, probably. But, after all, what did it matter to him, who had given them?

He liked the soft fur toque on her brown hair. It was most unwidow-like; but, as Mrs. Bellamy had said, why should she keep constantly before her the reminders of her widowhood?

Probably she would marry again. She had faithfully awaited his return; but, as he had given her to understand that he had no mind for marriage, he would now be out of the running.

There must be many men ready to console so charming a woman as Lady Hilary.

He would have to go through again, that which he had gone through before; only, this time it would not be as bad.

He set his teeth, and admitted the truth. This time it would be worse.

He was older now. Then, he had been little more than a boy. She was more lovely; more altogether alluring.

Yet—he did not desire her perpetual companionship; he did not want to be bound. He wanted only herself; but that was a big "only."

Oh, why could he not have had her, when he was young, and when he wanted all?

Now he had lost everything. Even the comfort of the Kind Voice was gone. He could not expect her to ring him up, again.

Her smile had been very friendly; but pride would have prompted a gay, friendly smile.

He went to his table, and settled to the work he had pushed aside in the morning.

* * * * *

At a quarter past ten, the telephone-bell rang.

He took up the receiver.

"Are you there?" It was Madge's voice.

"Yes," he said.

"Good-night, Rodney."

"Good-night, Madge."

He waited a few moments.

Then: "I say, Madge?" he whispered, tentatively.

There was no reply.

She had rung off.

He hung up the receiver.

After all, women do sometimes remember and keep a promise.

CHAPTER XXII

"WHY NOT?"

ON the next day, Steele called for Mrs. Bellamy as he had promised, and took her across to Marylebone Parish Church.

There they went to the vestry and found the entry, in the register, of the romantic marriage in which, on the 12th of September, 1846, that wonderful series of love-letters, which passed between the poets, culminated.

They saw the bold signature of Robert Browning, firm assurance in every stroke; the trembling "Elizabeth Barrett Moulton Barrett" beneath it, in the delicate handwriting of the poetess, so expressive of the nervous tremor of the frail bride, who was taking such great risks at the bidding of a great love; the stiff signature of the faithful maid, Elizabeth Wilson, her sole confidante in this stupendous undertaking; and the name of James Silverthorne, Robert Browning's cousin, who won lasting fame, by this one act of loyal friendship.

Rodney enjoyed Mrs. Bellamy's extreme interest and enthusiasm.

"And to think," she remarked at intervals, "that the Bishop could have seen this, by merely paying a shilling, and we did not know it!"

On leaving the church, they walked down Wimpole Street and looked at the outside of No. 50. Mrs. Bellamy wanted to send in her card, asking leave to see for one moment Mrs. Browning's sanctum on the second floor, where the first, and all subsequent meetings, between the poets took place; but Steele assured her that he had already tried to obtain this privilege, and failed. After all, it could hardly be expected of the owners of a private house, that they should turn it into a show-place for enthusiasts.

Mrs. Bellamy, who would cheerfully herself have conducted streams of visitors to any corner of her house which interested them, was hard to convince.

However, at last she yielded; gave a final impressive reading to the little tablet on the wall, and asked to be taken to see the corner of the street where Mrs. Browning and Wilson found a cab, and the chemist's shop at which they stopped for sal-volatile. After which romantic pilgrimage, the bishop's widow and Steele returned to Regent House by the exact route the fugitive bride must

have taken from her father's house to Marylebone Church.

Steele was amused and pleased at Mrs. Bellamy's enthusiasm. It voiced his own deep, though more silent, interest, and added to the enjoyment he already found in her companionship.

He lunched with her, and as they sat talking afterwards, in growing intimacy, she told him how constantly she missed the bishop's practice of reading aloud to her in the evening; of the many books associated for her with his beautifully modulated voice; and, finally, of the great trial of her rapidly failing sight.

At mention of the reading, Steele wondered whether she would like him to offer to drop in occasionally and read to her; yet feared lest it should seem presumption on his part, even in so small a thing as this, to suggest that he could stand in the sacred episcopal shoes.

But when she spoke of her failing sight, he rose and stood on the hearthrug. Had Lady Hilary been present she would have smiled and settled herself down to listen, knowing he had something which seemed to him of earnest import to say.

"Nobody need allow sight to fail, Mrs. Bellamy, who knows of a remedy of which I can tell you."

"My dear," said the bishop's widow, "don't give me the address of a new oculist! I have been to so many. But, like the poor woman in the gospels——"

"No oculists," said Rodney, "no glasses; no artificial treatment of any kind. A remedy of Nature's own. A remedy so simple that, like Naaman of old, preferring the great rivers of Abana and Pharpar, you may scorn it, as he scorned the humble little stream called Jordan."

"But I do not prefer Pharpar and Abana," said Mrs. Bellamy. "Pharpar and Abana are most expensive; and, as I say, I am nothing bettered, but rather grow worse. I am quite ready to dip in Jordan."

"Well, this will cost you nothing," said Steele. "And your readiness to dip in Jordan promises well for the success of my prescription."

"I spoke figuratively," explained the bishop's widow, alarmed. "I cannot undertake a pilgrimage to Palestine."

"No need you should," said Rodney. "The Jordan shall come to you. Now, listen. If your eyes hurt you when you use them, if reading increases the discomfort and glasses give no relief, you are probably suffering from a strain to the focusing muscles, rather than from failing sight.

You may have strained your focusing muscles, years ago, by using small print, reading or working in twilight, or reading while lying down, holding your book sideways or above you."

Mrs. Bellamy smiled.

"I fear I must plead guilty to having done, at one time or other, all these things."

"I thought so. Now, instead of increasing the weakness of your focusing muscles by the use of strong glasses, you must take measures to strengthen those muscles, so that they can once again adjust the focus of your sight, without causing you pain or inconvenience."

"Is dipping seven times in Jordan, warranted to do this?"

"I spoke figuratively! Now listen to a story told me by a Russian political prisoner, and you will realise at once where the dipping comes in.

"My friend was a man of great intellectuality, a writer himself, and devoted to reading and study. On a political charge, the details of which do not concern us, he was thrown into a Russian prison and kept there, during a long term of years. His cell was underground. The only light which reached him came through a grating high up in the wall. This meant a poor light always, and a very

long twilight. He was allowed writing materials, manuscript-paper, and practically any books for which he chose to ask. He read and wrote for hours. He had nothing else to do. But reading in a bad light tried his eyes severely. He knew he was straining his focusing muscles, yet the temptation to go on with a book, long after the fading light had warned him to desist, was too great to be resisted. At last he found himself confronted by the appalling fear that he was losing his eyesight. He could read, even when the light was at its best, only for a few minutes at a time, and the agony caused by those few minutes was almost unbearable. The burning pain in his eyeballs, night and day, nearly drove him mad.

"One night, as he lay tossing in the dark, he tried to gain relief by putting the palms of his hands against the clammy stone walls of his dungeon and then pressing them upon his eyes. Suddenly he remembered the delicious sensation, so cooling to the eyeballs, of opening the eyes under water while diving. This gave him an idea, at first only with a view to relieving his actual suffering. He put it into practice as soon as the grey dawn-light crept into his cell.

"He was allowed a tin basin and plenty of water. He filled the basin with cold water,

plunged the top of his head into it so that his eyes were covered, then opened them under the water, keeping them thus for twenty minutes. This he did three times a day.

"The burning pain was relieved almost immediately; but he continued the treatment, for he began to notice a most extraordinary difference in his eyesight. After a few weeks his sight was not only completely restored, but became stronger than it had ever been. He could write and read in the bad light without strain or effort, and during the whole of the remainder of his time in prison his sight did not fail him. If there was any threatening of the old trouble, he at once plunged his eyes into cold water, holding them open, and allowing the water to play around the sockets and around all the muscles which hold, turn, and focus the eyes.

"When I met him, a year after he had regained his liberty, he was a man of sixty, with the brightest eyes and the keenest sight I have ever come across.

"I was writing myself, at the time, pretty long hours, often without good light, and had begun to fear I might soon need glasses. I tried his plan, and found it answer perfectly. It requires some patience and determination; but the result well

repays the effort; particularly as five minutes, night and morning, is quite sufficient in an ordinary case of strained or fatigued sight. I shall never require artificial aids to vision while a basin of cold water is to be had. It has done so much for me, that I have made up my mind never to lose a chance of telling the story, and passing on a knowledge of the wonders worked by this extraordinarily simple remedy."

Mrs. Bellamy looked at Rodney. From the first she had been struck by the clear brightness of his keen eyes, the blue whites, the shining pupils.

"What an interesting story," she said; "and what a remarkable cure! But is it not almost impossible to open one's eyes under water?"

"Not at all," said Rodney; "we always do so in swimming and diving. Have you ever done deep diving?" asked Rodney, of the bishop's widow.

Gentle Mrs. Bellamy cast her mind back to the long-ago days when she used to bathe in the sea. She had a mental vision of herself, clinging tightly to a rope attached to her bathing-machine, and feeling very courageous when, by its aid, she jumped, at the rush of each incoming wave.

"No, I never exactly dived," she said. "But

an old bathing-woman, in a large sun-bonnet, used to take me by the wrists and plunge me beneath a wave, when I first entered the sea. I am sure I never kept my eyes open. I used to close them tightly, until the terrifying ordeal was over."

Rodney laughed. He also had a sudden vision of Mrs. Bellamy clinging to the rope, and bobbing up and down in the waves.

"Well, there is nothing alarming about a basin of water," he said. "Yet you need to do it rightly. It is best to plunge the eyes, one at a time, first one side and then the other. And keep your mouth and nose well out of the water. Just put in the top of your head, and make yourself open your eyes wide. Keep stretching and relaxing them. Breathe deeply, all the time. It is apt to be a little suffocating at first."

"I should like to try it," said Mrs. Bellamy; "in fact, I most certainly will try it. But it sounds a little—well, a little difficult."

"Really, it isn't," said Rodney, "if you do it right."

He looked round the pretty drawing-room as if seeking for something which was missing. "Could we send for a good deep basin of water, Mrs. Bellamy? Then you might experiment

at once, and I could make sure you do it right."

Mrs. Bellamy's enthusiasms fully equalled Rodney's on most points, but she really could not fancy herself removing her cap and proceeding to plunge the top of her head into a basin of water, in her drawing-room. To begin with, Prudence's face when requested to bring the basin in, would be most paralysing. And Rodney's firm insistence upon thoroughness would allow of no tentative little experimental essays.

"My dear Mr. Steele," she said, "you are more than kind. And indeed I intend to take your advice. But I am sure I shall manage best in the privacy of my own apartment. Suppose a visitor arrived whilst I was dipping in Jordan! But truly I am not ungrateful. And I will faithfully report progress to you. And now, while I think of it, I want you to dine with me the day after to-morrow. Madge Hilary is coming; and, unless you would prefer a larger party, I will ask nobody else. We will have a cosy little dinner, and spend a pleasant evening together. You and she can renew the acquaintance of old days. Madge shall play to us. She is a charming pianist. And she will love to hear the story of the Russian prisoner. At eight o'clock,

the day after to-morrow. Now, say you will come!"

Rodney considered, in quick flashes of thought.

Could he thus meet Madge at dinner, and spend a long evening with her, beneath the loving wing of the bishop's widow?

Could he sit near her, watch her, hear her talk?

Could he shake hands with Madge on meeting?

If asked to play, would she sit down and play "The Träumerei"?

Could he stand it, if she did?

To all these questions, propounded by his wiser self, his riotous desire provided but one answer: "Why not? . . . Why not? . . . Why not? . . . Why not?"

The pause had been but momentary; rendered almost unnoticeable by the fact that Mrs. Bellamy, stooping, scooped her toy poodle up into her lap, arranging his collar with whispered endearments.

"Thank you," said Steele, "I will come with pleasure. And now I must be off. I have a business appointment in the city at half-past three and another at four o'clock. I'm dining at the Ritz to-night with some people I knew in America, and afterwards going with them to *Quality Street*. Is it worth seeing?"

"A charming play," said Mrs. Bellamy, "from

all I hear. I do not, myself, go to theatres. But I always rejoice when those who do go, find something which cheers and uplifts, presenting ideals of chivalry and beauty. You must give me your opinion of *Quality Street.*"

"I will," said Rodney. "Good-bye. I hope I have not stayed too long or talked too much, and tired you."

"Not at all," she said, gently patting the hand she held. "You would never tire me, my dear. You are one of the life-givers. You bring a sense of health and energy, wherever you go."

Rodney laid his other hand over both the pretty, frail hands of the bishop's widow.

"You are one of the love-givers," he said. "You do a fellow no end of good. I feel more charitably disposed toward the world in general, when I have been with you."

As the door closed behind him, the bishop's widow turned and bent over the crayon portrait of the fine head in repose.

"How that would have pleased you, my dear one," she whispered. "And you could have helped him so much better than I. Such a dear lad—but not happy, not content. Something is wrong; something is missing. I dare say Madge

will be helpful. She is so capable and bright. Oh, dear me! How does one open one's eyes under water? I must most certainly lock Prudence out, when I make the attempt. Biffy! poor mistress greatly prefers Abana and Pharpar, to this terrifying dipping in Jordan!"

Biffy, peeping through his silken curls, looked very wise and sympathetic.

He and Prudence knew a thing or two, about terrifying dippings.

CHAPTER XXIII

KEEPING TRYST

THE distant clock chimed the quarter after ten. The telephone-bell rang.

"Are you there?"

"I am," said Rodney. "I ought not to be, though. I dined at the Ritz with some people I knew in America—awfully nice people. We went to a play after dinner. At ten o'clock I made an excuse, walked out, jumped into a taxi, and raced back here. They must have thought me quite mad. I think myself a bit of a fool. It was a rattling good play."

"Is it your first visit to *Quality Street?*"

"Yes. But how on earth did you know it was *Quality Street?*"

"Because I came out two minutes after you. I watched you grow restive; saw you consult your watch, get up, and leave the stalls. It is a charming play. We had better both go back. You

will see me, if you look up, in a box on your left. Good-night, Roddie."

"Good-night, Madge."

He caught up his coat and hat, and made a dash for the door.

Just as he closed it, the telephone-bell sounded again.

Hullo! She had probably changed her mind, and wished for a talk, instead of returning to the theatre.

What a deuced tight fit a latchkey is, when one is in a hurry.

Yet he got the door open before Jake could reach the telephone.

"All right, Jake. It's my call. Shut that door, please."

He caught up the receiver.

"Hullo! Yes, Madge?"

"Can I speak to Dr. Brown?" asked an unknown voice.

"No, you can't!" shouted Rodney. "It's his night off. He has taken the Matron out in an aeroplane."

"In a *what?*"

"In an *aeroplane.*"

"Spell it!" squeaked the unknown voice, in angry bewilderment.

"A-e-r-o-p-l-a-n-e!" shouted Rodney, and rang off.

He ran down the stairs, laughing.

What a mad night! It was only fair to let Dr. Brown and the Matron have a small share in the general madness. Beautiful frosty night! Bright moon! Perfect for flying! Any matron with an atom of spunk would enjoy skimming over London with Dr. Brown; well out of reach of the squeaky wrath of the unknown voice.

As he ran down the steps, Lady Hilary's car glided away from the next entrance.

He dashed across the road, and jumped into a taxi.

Rodney walked into his seat in the stalls during the interval between the second and third acts. The lights were up.

Madge was already seated in her box, in the absolute calmness of complete serenity, as if she had not moved from it since taking her seat at half-past eight.

But as his eyes met hers, she sent him a smile of vivid amusement, and it seemed to Steele that her eyes held a half-mocking tenderness.

Really they had behaved like a couple of children! Dashing home to say good-night to one

another over the telephone! Of course had he seen her here, he need not have gone. But he could not let her ring him up, and be answered by Jake.

He glanced again at the box.

She was not looking his way this time. He could observe her more critically.

Good heavens! How beautiful she was! And lilies of the valley at her breast again. He did not believe, for a moment, that Billy gave her the lilies. It was probably some ass of a fellow who was fool enough to imagine that such a woman as Lady Hilary could be won by a few picturesque attentions.

How regal she looked, and aloof from all surroundings, alone in her box.

And a quarter of an hour ago, she had bidden him good-night, in that rich, tender voice of hers. She had flown quickly home, in order to keep her promise, and save him from disappointment.

He rather enjoyed sitting in the stalls while she was in a box; half the house between them, and —this intimate fact.

She turned and spoke to somebody at the door.

At that instant the lights went down; the curtain rose.

For a while Rodney's attention was fixed upon

the stage. But by and by he glanced up again at the box.

A man sat beside Madge. They both leaned forward, watching the stage. His head was very near hers. Rodney could not see his face; but there were lilies of the valley in his buttonhole.

You enjoy the exquisite humour and pathos of *Quality Street* better, with a freer mind.

After all, what did it matter if a dozen men, all wearing lilies of the valley, sat in Lady Hilary's box? It was no concern of his.

What a rotten finish to a pleasant day.

Well—anyway Dr. Brown and the Matron were having a good time. And Jake had probably, by this time, sworn a few mild and quite meaningless oaths at the unknown voice, and finally given it the right number.

What a crooked world!

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SMILE IN THE MIRROR

BILLY rang up, early the next morning, to say that he and Valeria were motoring to town and would come to the flat for tea, at about four o'clock. Valeria greatly hoped that Steele would be in, and would take tea with them.

"Please do, old man," Billy added. "My wife has set her heart upon seeing you. She is not very strong—nothing serious, you know—I mean, nothing—er—*fatal*—but not very strong, and must not be crossed or contradicted."

Billy's voice, usually so cheerful, sounded anxious and worried, even through the telephone.

"Certainly, old chap," answered Rodney. "I will arrange to be in at four."

"And—listen, Rod. Don't mention Valeria's illness. I have said more than I ought, already. She doesn't like her health talked about."

"All right! I'll make no 'kind inquiries.' I say, Billy? It's nothing infectious, I suppose.

I've had whooping-cough, chicken-pox, and measles; but I've not had mumps."

"Rotter!" said Billy, more cheerfully. "It's nothing catching. Don't be a silly fool. I want you to hit it off with Valeria. But she mustn't be crossed or contradicted."

"My dear fellow, I don't cross and contradict people, in their own house, the first time I meet them; particularly delicate people, suffering from mumps."

"I tell you it's *not* mumps!" shouted Billy. "If you mention mumps in Valeria's presence, I'll——"

"Do be calm, old chap. I have already promised not to allude to Lady Valeria's mumps. You have only mentioned it—or do you call it 'them'?—in confidence. I am not supposed to know anything——"

Billy rang off.

Steele went back to the dining-room, chuckling.

"Poor old boy! That's done him good. He sounded too mysteriously tragic for words. Why do cheerful, happy-go-lucky people, such as Billy, burden themselves with family cares? Fancy being tied to a woman who must not be crossed or contradicted! One might as well go at once and

be measured for a muzzle. Now for a mental picture of Lady Valeria! Tall and florid, I should say; one of those large, all-pervading women; masses of fluffy fair hair, very carefully arranged, yet never looking tidy; great, grey eyes, with black lashes which startle you at first, until you realise that their blackness is Lady Valeria's mistake—not Nature's. Full in the face, and, of course, now she has mumps, even fuller; in fact, painfully full. I knew from the first sentence she spoke over the 'phone, that Lady Valeria had a swelled head! I am sure she is taller than Billy. Thank goodness she can't very well top me, or Billy with pride would have mentioned her height as abnormal. Well, this afternoon we shall hear Lady Valeria's views on Max Romer. I fancy Max Romer will survive it. But she must not be crossed or contradicted. Poor old Billy!"

When, however, rather before four o'clock, a latchkey was fitted noiselessly into the lock, the hall-door opened, and Lady Valeria glided in, closing the door, without a sound, behind her, Rodney had the surprise of his life.

A mirror hung upon the wall, immediately to the right of the door, hidden by a high screen from the greater part of the hall, but not from the

fire-place, before which Rodney happened to be standing. Thus it came to pass, that he first saw Lady Valeria's face, reflected in a mirror.

She had paused before it, and was looking at herself with a gaze of absorbed interest.

She opened a little gold bag which hung from her left wrist, took from it an oval enamelled box, and from that something soft and white. She passed this, lightly and rapidly over her face, with an extra touch here and there; returned it to her bag; and gave her hair a few little pats.

Then she put her face close to the glass and smiled—a most extraordinary smile; a smile which combined admiration, condescension, interest, and greeting, all in one. Lady Valeria smiled this smile, suddenly, into the mirror.

Rodney, erect upon the hearthrug, watched her, spellbound.

All at once she glanced past her own face, and met his gaze, stern, searching, silent, in the mirror. It was her first intimation that she was not alone.

A look of fury passed into Lady Valeria's eyes, a look of such venomous anger that, if mirrored looks could slay, Rodney would then and there have reached his last moment. Almost instantly

it passed; but he knew that in that moment he had had a glimpse of the real Lady Valeria.

She turned and glided forward, both hands outstretched; upon her face a smile which combined admiration, condescension, interest, and greeting, all in one. It was the smile of the mirror.

"My dear Mr. Steele, this is delightful! At last we meet."

Rodney shook hands with Lady Valeria.

As he responded with a quiet commonplace to her effusive greeting, he was thinking to himself: "Never was I more totally at fault in a preconceived conception."

Lady Valeria was petite, fragile, almost fairy-like in figure. Her black eyebrows and eyelashes were Nature's own gift and required no assistance from applied art. Her hair lay demurely, in smooth folds, on either side of the perfect oval of her face. Her large, dark eyes appeared pools of mystery and wonder. Her hands came on before, as she advanced and spoke, each finger moving and working, as if with those little grasping hands she would pluck the soul from out a man, toy with it, and then throw it aside. At her waist was a bunch of crimson carnations; yet the pervading scent she brought with her was essence of violets.

Steele realised, immediately, how entirely characteristic was this. Had Lady Valeria worn violets, the scent wafted around her would probably have been carnation.

At first sight of her he mentally exclaimed: "How young!" A few moments later he revised that impression into: "How much older than I thought."

As she talked to Rodney, she came so close to him that he stepped back almost into the fire, feeling as if those working fingers were going to catch hold of him, the white oval of that face to be pressed against his breast. But this was only a way of Lady Valeria's when she talked. To men and women alike, she did it. It had drawn poor Billy's honest young heart clean out of him. His arms had been around her, before he realised how little—how very little—this pressing against him, with large, appealing eyes, and parted lips, really meant.

"Let us come into the library and talk," said Lady Valeria. "We will not have tea until half-past four. I sent Billy off, to pay a call next door. Two's company, you know." The smile grew arch and intimate. "Billy's presence is not conducive to intellectual conversation."

Steele followed her into the library.

"I cannot agree with you, there, Lady Valeria. I would as soon talk to Billy as to anybody I know."

She sank into a chair, looking up at him with mocking eyes.

"Really, Mr. Steele? You must be easily satisfied."

"Billy is my friend," said Rodney, stiffly.

Billy's wife laughed.

"Don't be so alarmingly serious. Have you no sense of humour? I was joking."

"I am glad to hear it, Lady Valeria."

She lay back in her chair; crossed her knees, displaying a good deal of silk petticoat; took a carnation from her belt, and laid it against the whiteness of her cheek. The pose was distinctly effective. Steele recognised it instantly, as one which had been perfected before a mirror.

Ah, poor Billy!

Steele felt he could almost have liked the big, aggressive, fluffy-haired Lady Valeria of his imagination. Mumps and all, he would have welcomed her.

He now found himself confronted by that most terrible of all the devil's devices--an alluring woman, absolutely devoid both of conscience and of heart.

Poor foolish Billy, to have laid his honest heart in those little clawing hands; to have made *this* the mistress of his lovely home; the mother of his child.

"Sit down," she said, waving him to a chair with the carnation. "Now which shall we discuss first, Mr. Steele? Your delightful books, or *The Great Divide*?"

"Neither subject appeals to me, Lady Valeria."

"Indeed! What a combination of modesty and jealousy."

"How so?"

"Modesty about your own work. Jealousy of Max Romer's."

"I am not jealous of Max Romer. I am merely sorry for him."

"Sorry for him! You! Sorry for the author of the most successful book of the season! And why, pray?"

"Because," said Steele, deliberately, looking Lady Valeria steadily in the face, "the main incident of his book is not true to life. He has misjudged his values. Since I realised this, the whole book, to my mind, has been put out of drawing. The perspective is faulty, therefore the entire fabric totters."

"Well! Really!—I do not agree. I completely disagree. It is true to life, at every point, or—allow me to assure you—Max Romer would not have written it."

"I do not think you can be in a position, Lady Valeria, to vouch for what Max Romer would, or would not, have done."

She laughed—a silvery little laugh—tapping her lips with the carnation.

"How amusing that you should say that to *me!* You almost tempt me to trust you with a great secret."

"Please do not do that. I keep my own secrets; but I cannot undertake to keep those of other people."

She dropped the carnation, framed the oval of her face in both her hands, and leaning forward gazed with large, pathetic eyes at Steele, speaking in the appealing, confiding voice, and with the childlike manner, which usually brought about the capitulation of those who were attempting to resist her.

"You are not very kind to me, Cousin Rodney. I am almost inclined to think you are trying to snub me. Yet I have *so* looked forward to meeting you. I *adore* your books."

"It is kind of you to say so, Lady Valeria. I

was told the other day that *The Great Divide* is worth all my books put together."

She clapped her hands, laughing gleefully.

"Oh, how amusing that you should say that to *me!* Have you a sense of humour? Yes, I know you have. I think I *must* trust you with my secret."

The telephone sounded sharply, in the hall. They heard Jake answering it.

"What is that?" asked Lady Valeria.

"Probably a call for the hospital. A great many people seem perpetually anxious to speak to the Matron or to Dr. Brown."

"What a nuisance they are! When will they realise the change of number?"

Jake entered.

"A lady asking for you on the 'phone, sir."

"Will you excuse me for a moment?" said Steele. He left the room, closing the door behind him. As he lifted the receiver, he saw the library door noiselessly open, a few inches.

"Hullo?" said Steele. ". . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . . Yes. . . . . Yes."

As he hung up the receiver, the library door closed as noiselessly as it had opened.

Steele walked across the hall. Billy would have said his jaw meant business.

Lady Valeria was standing at the window when he re-entered the library, her fingers pressed upon the pane, gazing down into the road below.

"How the taxis fly past," she began, without turning her head, directly she heard his step in the room behind her. "While you have been gone, I have counted thirty-two. I wonder how many there are in the whole of London now."

Steele closed the door, and walked over to the fire-place.

CHAPTER XXV

LADY HILARY UNRAVELS THE TANGLE

LADY HILARY was writing letters, when her brother was announced.

She came forward at once, with a bright smile of welcome.

"Why, Billy? What a pleasure! Take your favourite chair, old boy. Have you come to tea?"

Billy sat down. There was about him an air of grave preoccupation, which did not escape his sister.

"Not to tea, thank you, Madge. We are having tea at the flat. Valeria is calling on Mrs. Bellamy, and then going on up. She wishes to meet Rodney alone. She sent me in here; and I was glad to come. I am keen for a talk."

Billy settled into his chair, and looked across at his sister.

"So you and Rod have met?"

"Yes, dear. I asked him to come round, three

evenings ago. We had a long chat. We have spoken together once or twice since; and passed each other in the street. To-morrow we both dine with dear old Mrs. Bellamy. This should be quite pleasant."

"Oh, 'pleasant' be blowed!" said Billy, with brotherly candour. "Is it all right for you, Madge?"

"Quite all right, Billy dear. But naturally it takes us a little while to become used to the change of circumstances. We have both been through deep waters since I broke off our engagement. It has been harder for Rodney than for me. The situation requires patience; and a good deal of mental adjustment."

"Rot!" said Billy, with fraternal brevity. "I should say its requirements would be best met by a parson and a special license. However, I won't bother you with advice gratis about your own private affairs. I've quite enough to do, with managing my own. I say, Madge! I've something awfully important and interesting to tell you. Valeria says I may tell you now, on condition that you keep it a profound secret."

As Lady Hilary looked into his eager face, a shade of sadness passed into her own. But her smile was very tender, as she answered: "Billy

dear, of course anything you tell me in confidence goes no further. But is there any need for so much mystery? I think I have guessed the secret already."

"I dare say you have," said Billy. "In fact I can't imagine, now, how it was we didn't all guess it, knowing how fearfully clever Valeria is; just the kind of woman to pull off a thing on her own, without a word about it to anybody. Of course I'm proud and delighted—any man would be. And yet I'm a bit perplexed and anxious, too."

"Billy dear," said Lady Hilary, gently, "we are talking at cross-purposes. What is this secret?"

"Why, you said you had guessed it. If not, my dear girl, sit tight! My wife is the author of *The Great Divide*. 'Max Romer' is Valeria's *nom-de-plume*."

Lady Hilary certainly "sat tight"; so "tight" that even Billy could hardly fail to be satisfied with the speechless amazement with which she regarded him. The vivid colour rushed into her cheeks, then slowly faded, leaving them very white. Her eyes, wide with astonishment, mutely questioned Billy; and, as she marked the triumph at her surprise, writ large upon his

honest, boyish face, they slowly filled with tears, drowning her surprise in floods of fathomless pity and compunction.

Ah, poor Billy; poor honest, straightforward Billy! incapable of deceit himself; or of suspecting crooked ways in others.

"Lead me in a plain path, because of mine enemies."

Madge remembered learning the twenty-seventh psalm by heart, with Billy, in the old schoolroom days. They had to repeat it aloud, taking alternate verses. Billy usually asked to begin, because to do so pulled him safely through the first verse, just after his final peep into the book. This gave him the eleventh verse. The words now came back to Lady Hilary. She could hear Billy's clear treble repeating, gaily: "Lead me in a plain path, because of mine enemies." A plain path had always been necessary for Billy; but, so far, he had had no enemies.

"A man's foes shall be they of his own household." Alas, poor Billy!

"It was all written and finished before I met Valeria," her brother was explaining, when Lady Hilary forced herself to take in the sense of his excited flow of words. "She knew she had done a strong and clever bit of work, but was deter-

mined it should stand on its own merits and not have the advantage of her—her name," substituted Billy, for the word Lady Valeria had used.

Madge made no comment. Her pitying eyes still searched his face.

"She has kept the secret wonderfully. Even the publishers do not know the identity of Max Romer. She sent them the manuscript through an agent she could absolutely trust, and all the business side of the thing is in his hands. The book is bringing her in a small fortune, but she gives it all to charities. Did you notice that anonymous gift of a thousand pounds to the London Hospital the other day? It was from Valeria. She had just received it in payment of the royalty due on *The Great Divide.* Isn't she wonderful, Madge? And she told it all to me so simply last night, sitting by the fire in her bedroom, in a rose-pink what-d'you-call-it? with her beautiful hair falling around her like a veil. We talked until two o'clock in the morning. Valeria very rarely gets any sleep before three, and she likes me to sit up listening while she talks."

Again Lady Hilary's eyes filled with tears. This explained Billy's jaded look, which had often

perplexed her of late; his loss of the fresh colouring of perfect health; his tired eyes, and nervous manner.

Alas, poor Billy!

"She told me a curious thing, Madge. She said that all her life she has always so loved her own hands, and longed to do something great with them; something about which the world should talk. She tried to paint; but her pictures were too full of subtle, inner meaning to be understood by so-called critics, or by ordinary individuals like—well, like me," said Billy, humbly.

"She took up music, and her playing was wonderful. Everybody who heard her said she ought to have been a professional. But she only felt able to play when alone; because the inspiration left her fingers if people sat by, thinking common thoughts, and making absurd comments.

"At last she made up her mind to write a book—a book which everybody should read, understand, and admire. So she wrote *The Great Divide*. And now when she looks at her hands, she feels they have indeed done something worthy of her love for them. Madge, did you ever feel inclined to love your own hands in such a curious way?"

"Never!" said Lady Hilary, emphatically. "And what's more, Billy-boy, if such an idea had entered my head, I should very quickly have used my own hands to box my own ears."

Billy laughed. A healthy sentiment, tersely expressed, still appealed irresistibly to his natural man, notwithstanding Lady Valeria's attempts to develop him along the lines of the morbidly æsthetic.

"You and I are commonplace, Madge," he said, good-temperedly. "We are like everybody else—just peas in a pod! Since our marriage, Valeria has told me scores of times that I am too commonplace for words; and, of course, I know I am. But she has always been unusual—unlike the ordinary ruck; and now she has justified herself, by doing a big thing. I am immensely proud and glad; and yet—there is one point which troubles me."

"What is that, dear?"

"I remember Valeria saying when first the book appeared, long before I began to have any suspicion that it was hers, that whoever wrote that story must have been writing a personal experience. I am certain she does not now recollect saying this; but I have not forgotten;

and I am worried to-day by the idea that the lonely chap on the rock—with the dead beasts, and the sunset, and all that, you know—may have gone to the devil on my wedding-day because I had had the luck to win Valeria. And—worse than that, Madge—I hate to think that all the moonlight, and kissing, and hayfields, and—you know?—were Valeria's own experience before she married me; that she loved some other man as—as desperately as Katherine loved Valentine. You remember how often it mentions Katherine's beautiful hands, and what Val thought of them? Madge, I haven't dared to touch Valeria's hands since I knew she had written *The Great Divide.*"

Alas, poor Billy! "Lead me in a plain path, because of mine enemies."

Lady Hilary grew cold as she realised the duty which lay before her.

She held her beautiful hands to the warmth of the fire.

She did not love them, herself; but they had been passionately loved—long ago; and the man who had loved them, and who had kissed them in the hayfields, was the man who had written *The Great Divide.*

"Lead me in a plain path," she said again,

within herself; and at once decided to take, without hesitation, the only direct way of unravelling this tangle of deception.

"Billy dear," she said, looking into the fire, and not at her brother, "does Valeria take any sort of drug to make her sleep?"

Billy hesitated.

"Well—yes, Madge; she does. But she would not be pleased if she knew I had told you. She can't sleep without it. The first dose excites her, and makes her talkative; the second, puts her to sleep; but she mustn't take them too near together. That is why we often sit up for hours and talk."

"Did you know this before you married her?"

"Of course not. How should I? But I knew directly after."

Ah, poor Billy!

"Has it ever struck you that she imagines unlikely things about herself and other people, when under the influence of this drug?"

"Imagines? Unlikely? Oh, no! Of course she tells me heaps of things of which I should not have thought. But I make no pretence to such cleverness as Valeria's."

"I see."

Lady Hilary turned from the fire, and deliberately faced her brother.

"Billy, long ago, when we were children together, you once made me angry, and I slapped your face. I was sorry directly afterwards, and spent my only penny on bull's-eyes as a peace-offering. Whereupon, you generously forgave me."

Billy laughed.

"You were a little wild-cat, in those days; weren't you, Madge?"

"I was, dear. I am a wild-cat now, when I am fairly roused; only I don't slap people's faces! Billy, I remember, after you had forgiven me, you remarked, with even greater generosity, that you would sooner have your face slapped full and fair and have done with it, than be nagged at, in an underhand way, as some boys you knew were nagged by their sisters. Do you remember?"

"No, I don't remember saying so. But I can quite believe I said it. I should feel the same, now."

"Billy dear, I am afraid I am going to give you a bad slap in the face; and I must ask you to believe that this time it is prompted by love—a love too true to allow me to know a thing which you ought to know also, without frankly telling

you that thing, however painful it may be to us both that I should have to say it, and you to hear it."

"All right," said Billy. "Slap away!"

"Billy," said Lady Hilary, "Valeria is not the author of *The Great Divide*."

"What the devil do you mean?" inquired Billy, staring at his sister.

"I am afraid I mean exactly that, dear. *The Great Divide* was not written by your wife, and I am bound to tell you so; because, if you said to anybody else what you have said to me this afternoon, and the real author became known, you would find yourself in a position of quite intolerable shame."

"And who the dickens do you call 'the real author'?"

"I am not at liberty to say. The secret of Max Romer's identity will be faithfully kept by the few to whom it is entrusted."

Billy whitened.

"And may I ask who told you this—this—invention?"

"Rodney told me. He knows the author of *The Great Divide*."

"It is a lie!" said Billy.

Lady Hilary flushed.

"I think you are the first person who has ever accused Rodney Steele of lying."

"My dear girl, I don't accuse Rodney. Good old Rod is straight enough. Don't we always say: 'True as Steele'? But the fellow who dared to pretend to Rodney that he had written my wife's book, is a damnable liar; and if ever I meet him, I'll jolly well tell him so, and punch his head if he dares deny it!"

Lady Hilary waited patiently until Billy's outburst was over. Then she said:

"Have you told anybody else that Valeria wrote *The Great Divide*?"

"Nobody," said Billy. "I only knew it for certain myself, at two o'clock this morning. She had thrown out little hints, but I hardly took them seriously. It seemed too big a thing, to be possible. Besides, it has almost always been considered a man's book."

"It *is* a man's book," said Lady Hilary, firmly. "Max Romer is a man."

"Do you wish to make me angry, Madge?" inquired Billy, in a voice of fury.

"No, dear. But I wish to save you, if possible, from a public humiliation. Has Valeria told anybody else?"

"I think not. But she is probably telling

Rodney, at this very moment." Billy looked at the clock. "It is a quarter past four. She was going to the flat at four o'clock. She said she should tell Rodney 'if the way opened.' I expect she meant to hint a bit, and let him jump to it. I only hope to goodness he isn't telling *her* any rotten story about some friend of his pretending to be Max Romer."

"I think," said Madge, slowly, "from what I know of Rodney, that he will probably tell Valeria the exact truth."

"In that case," said Billy, "the sooner I go round the better. I will not have Valeria crossed or upset."

Madge pondered this, in silence.

Then: "Billy," she said; "I think you had better go round, tell Rodney, quite simply, that you believe Valeria to be the author of *The Great Divide*, and see what he says."

"And I think you had better come too, Madge, and hear me tell him; and hear what Valeria and I have to say, if he trots out any preposterous story about some chap he knows, claiming to be Max Romer."

Lady Hilary considered this. Billy was asking her to do a harder thing than he knew. But she was not given to sparing herself, if the

happiness of those for whom she cared was at stake.

"Certainly I will come," she said. "We can all have tea together; and after tea you can bring up the subject, quite naturally. And now, Billy, while I get ready, will you go through to Nanny's room, and give her a few minutes? She was greatly disappointed the other evening because Master Billy came, and went, and never a sight did she have of him! She is knitting little jackets for a bazaar. Go, like a good boy, and admire them."

As the door closed behind her brother, Lady Hilary flew to the telephone.

"Mayfair, 494," she said; and waited anxiously.

"Hullo?"

It was Jake's voice.

"Is Mr. Steele at home?"

"He's in the library."

"Kindly say he is wanted at once at the telephone."

"Right," said Jake; "hold the line."

The moments seemed hours.

Then she heard Rodney's deep voice.

"Hullo?"

"Roddie, it is I speaking— Madge. Is my sister-in-law with you? Answer only 'yes' or 'no.'"

"Yes."

"I thought so. And if Valeria is anywhere in the flat, she is now overhearing every word you say to me. 'Yes' is all I want from you; but don't miss a word of what I have to say. Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Rodney, Valeria has told poor old Billy, with many elaborate details, that she is Max Romer, author of *The Great Divide*. Billy believes it absolutely, and is much elated. We can't let it go on, Roddie. For Billy's sake we must stop it. Do you agree?"

"Yes."

"Billy is coming round, almost immediately, and I am coming with him. I am sorry to be obliged to do this; but Billy insisted. We shall all have tea together, and then Billy will tell you that Valeria is the author of *The Great Divide*. I can trust you to judge what it will be best to do then. I have already told him that you and I know Max Romer, but that I am not at liberty to divulge Max Romer's real name. Was this right?"

"Yes."

"Billy, naturally, uses very strong language concerning your friend who pretends to have

written his wife's book. He believes in her absolutely. You will know how much of the truth it is necessary to tell him. For their own sakes, they will keep our secret. Have I made it quite clear?"

"Yes."

"Very well. In about a quarter of an hour you must expect us to walk in. I know you will do what is really best for poor Billy, and for us all. Good-bye."

Lady Hilary rang off.

CHAPTER XXVI

"I AM MAX ROMER!"

WHEN Steele returned to the library, after receiving Lady Hilary's important communication through the telephone, he knew that he had but a very few moments in which to decide upon his line of action.

Madge's carefully explained programme, he at once swept on one side. It was not in his nature to face a difficult situation, hampered by a prearranged plan of campaign. A difficult thing had to be done, and Steele did not propose to sit through tea, mildly awaiting a cue from Billy.

An unpleasant scene was inevitable; therefore his first idea was to spare Madge as far as possible, by getting the worst of it over before she arrived.

Also, his instinct told him that he could deal with this woman more easily alone. The presence of three people, would mean the complication of three different poses from Lady Valeria.

He realised that this gave him but a very few minutes.

For Billy's sake, Lady Valeria must be unmasked; for his own sake, and Madge's, she must be silenced.

He stood on the hearthrug, his eyes bent upon the slim figure at the window, in its trailing draperies. The slender hands were pressed against the glass, as if they would force their way through, and, reaching down into the street below, steal from some passing wayfarer, the thing he valued most.

Steele waited.

At any moment he might hear Billy's latchkey turn in the lock of the hall-door; yet, with immense self-control, he waited in silence. The least change of tone or manner on his part, would put this woman instantly on her guard.

She turned from the window and glided back to her chair.

"Well, Cousin Rodney, you have not much to say! Can you not even hazard a guess as to the number of taxis now running in London?"

She looked up at him with an ingratiating smile. His morose silence stimulated her determination to make him talk. His aversion to

herself, which he made very little effort to conceal, was fuel to the flame of her desire to attract and to interest him.

She wanted him to notice her hands, to say they were artistic, to ask what great thing those little hands had wrought. It would not be the first time a man had spoken to her of her hands, after half an hour's acquaintance. It had happened once in a railway-carriage. A perfect stranger had leaned forward and told her how wonderful he thought her hands. Lady Valeria had been enchanted; but in telling the story afterwards—even in gloating over it alone—a veil had had to be drawn over the stranger's subsequent behaviour, and her own hurried flight from the compartment, at the next station.

She now lifted her hands appealingly to Steele.

"That horrid telephone interrupted us at a most fascinating moment in our conversation. You had just told me that *The Great Divide* was worth all your own books put together——"

"That I had been told so, Lady Valeria."

"It amounts to the same thing. Of course, you don't *really* think so. Authors always, at the bottom of their hearts, consider their own books the best on the market."

"Excuse me, Lady Valeria. I do not think

you are in a position to know anything whatever about the bottom of the heart of an author. We try to show a brave front to the world; but, within, we have to fight a fierce battle with discouragement, sometimes with almost despair. Every true writer is the severest critic of his own work. Personally, when I read the fine writings of some of my contemporaries, I feel inclined to hurl my own stuff to the bottom of the sea. To allow a book to appear under his own name is, to my thinking, one of the bravest things a man can do."

Phew! What a lengthy speech; and how many precious moments were consumed in its delivery! But its opening sentence must be given time to do its work. It was the only one to which Lady Valeria had listened. She was making up her mind.

"I! not in a position to know—! My dear Mr. Steele! Have you a sense of humour?"

"You asked me that a few minutes ago, Lady Valeria, and replied yourself to the question." He looked at her, grimly. "You appear to set great store by humour."

She waved a carnation at him.

Idiot! How he disliked her! But Lady Valeria adored being disliked; especially when it lay in

her power to humiliate the person who presumed to resist her. She could not forego this chance of humiliating Steele. She would make him wish to hide, not his books only, but himself in the depths of the sea.

She smiled at him sweetly—the smile of the mirror; but this time a touch of venom was mingled with the former ingredients.

"Of course you have a sense of humour," she said; "and for that reason I am going to trust you with my secret. If you betray me, your friend Billy will shoot you! I cannot let you miss the exquisite humour of this situation. I—I, who am not in a position to know anything whatever of the heart of an author—I am Max Romer, author of *The Great Divide!*"

Then there awoke in Steele a sensation he had never before experienced—the intense, indignant wrath of a writer, against one who falsely claims to be the creator of his most cherished work.

Outwardly he remained grimly calm; but this inward impulse of fury at the audacious lie uttered by those smiling lips, enforced by the mockery in those half-closed eyes, tore from him every shred of compunction over the unmasking of Lady Valeria; all remembrance of Madge

and Billy; all thought of the importance of safeguarding his own secret.

He walked over to the writing-table.

"In that case, Lady Valeria," he said, "it will add to the exquisite humour of the situation, if I show you the original manuscript of *The Great Divide*."

He pulled open a drawer, took from it a large bundle of closely written sheets, which he placed upon a little table at Lady Valeria's elbow.

Then he took up his position upon the hearth-rug, facing her.

"Do look at it," he said. "It must be of the most exceptional interest to Max Romer, to see, for the first time, the original manuscript of *The Great Divide*."

Lady Valeria's hands flew to her mouth.

Steele realised that the movement had been just in time to stifle a scream.

She turned and bent over the manuscript, scrutinising it in silence.

Steele felt an impulse of gratitude for her really remarkable self-control. It would have been distinctly awkward if she had screamed, and Jake had come in.

Suddenly those little clawing hands made a movement as if to seize and tear the manuscript.

But Rodney was too quick for her. In an instant it was back in the drawer, and he had turned the key in the lock.

As he put the key into his pocket, Lady Valeria rose, glided to the fire-place, dropped a crushed carnation into the hottest place in the fire, and watched it shrivel and blacken.

Then she turned upon Steele, on her face a look of such livid rage and malice, that even he stepped back a pace.

"It is an impudent forgery," she whispered. "I will expose it."

"In that case," he said, "I shall be compelled to show you an even more impudent forgery: namely, the agreement between Max Romer and the publishers of *The Great Divide*, duly signed and witnessed. And I shall require you, Lady Valeria, to produce, within twenty-four hours, your manuscript of *The Great Divide*, and your agreement for its publication."

"How came *you* by that manuscript?" she demanded, leaning forward and pointing at him with the forefingers of both hands. "And what right have *you* to require anything in the matter?"

"Merely this right," said Steele, "that the manuscript is my own."

He came a step nearer, towering over the woman who had tried to steal his best work from him.

She put up both hands to ward him off, but could not remove her frightened eyes from his dark face of righteous scorn.

"*I* am Max Romer," said Rodney Steele. "And I give you fair warning that if the world learns this fact through you, it will also immediately be told how you came into possession of a secret which otherwise would never have been known."

They stood in silence, confronting one another, while a latchkey turned in the lock outside. Following on the bang of the front door, Billy's voice sounded in the hall.

The tension of Lady Valeria's attitude relaxed. She smiled at Steele; and every ingredient, save venom, had passed from that smile.

She glided to her chair, sank gracefully into its depths, and selected with care a fresh bloom from the bunch at her waist.

She was waving a red carnation playfully at him, when the library door opened, and Madge walked in, closely followed by Billy.

CHAPTER XXVII

LADY VALERIA'S SENSE OF HUMOUR

"WELL," said Madge—and the sound of the Kind Voice brought to Rodney an instant sense of comfort and peace—"here we are at last! I am afraid we have kept you waiting. Billy and I went in to see old Nanny, Valeria; and it is always difficult to escape from Nanny's room. Her delight in having us, holds us beside her chair. We become 'Miss Madge,' and 'Master Billy,' and the old sense of nursery discipline reasserts itself when Nanny says: 'Sit you down, my dears.' Down we sit as meekly as if Nanny were going to put on our pinafores, and help us to bread-and-milk. Don't we, Billy? Rodney, you must come round and call upon old Nanny. She has read all your books, and speaks of you with most appropriating pride."

"Ring for tea, Billy," said Lady Valeria. "You have kept us waiting nearly half an hour. If Mr. Steele and I had not been engaged in

most absorbing conversation, we should have sent for tea long ago, and begun without you.

Billy rang, without comment. His mind was completely occupied by one idea. Madge had bidden him to say nothing about *The Great Divide* until tea was over. He would be guided by Madge in this. But, with so important a thing on his mind, he must not be expected to talk upon other matters.

Rodney, also, was inclined to be silent. The strenuous scene with Lady Valeria, already seemed an impossible nightmare. She practically ceased to exist for him, as soon as Madge stepped into the room, as soon as her voice—gracious, helpful, comforting—fell upon his ear. It meant so much to have her, in this room where he sat alone each day; to look up and meet her calm, kind eyes; to watch her, unobserved; to see her do the little everyday things which everybody does; but which Madge did, as only Madge would do them.

When tea arrived, Lady Valeria, from the depths of a chair, remarked languidly: "You pour out, Madge. I am tired; and having got into this chair, I really cannot be bothered to move. Billy, put me a little table here, beside my chair. No, not that one! I loathe that table!

I never wish to see it again. Put it in the hall, and tell your one-armed creature, that it is to be sent at once to a Church Army Home. . . . Yes, that one will do. . . . Don't be clumsy!"

So Lady Hilary poured out the tea; and, after ten years, Rodney again took his cup from her hand.

Memories awoke, vivid, searching, insistent. Each knew the other was remembering, things until that moment forgotten. That cup of tea might almost have bridged the Great Divide. But Billy spoke.

"Rodney, do come to us for Christmas. Madge is coming—aren't you, Madge? We shall be such a jolly party. We should hate to think of you here, alone. Shouldn't we, Valeria?"

"Do come," said Lady Valeria, sweetly, "if you have no other plans for Christmas."

Rodney looked at Madge.

Madge looked into the teapot, and added boiling water.

"Will anybody have some more tea?"

Rodney passed his cup.

"You are very kind, Billy," he said. "I have no other plans for Christmas."

"You see," explained Lady Valeria, "we could not definitely ask you to the Manor, until you

and Madge had met. There was a tremendous lot of fuss and mystery about not allowing you to know that Madge was next door."

"Not 'mystery,' Valeria," said Madge, gaily; "only a foolish whim of mine, to give Rodney a surprise. We soon found each other out, though; didn't we, Rodney? I might just as well have come to the station."

Lady Valeria laughed; not a very pleasant laugh.

"I did not wish to make a fuss, Valeria," Madge added, quickly, in response to the suggestiveness of her sister-in-law's laugh. "But Rodney and I are very old friends, and it meant a good deal to us to meet again, after ten years."

Then Lady Valeria spoke, very deliberately, looking from one to the other of the party, with malicious amusement in her eyes.

"Katherine, in *The Great Divide*," she said, "has always reminded me of Madge. It was clever of me to notice that, even before I had found out the secret of the identity of Max Romer."

Billy started.

"The identity of Max Romer?" he said, and looked at Valeria, in bewilderment. Then he turned to Steele. "I gather my wife has entrusted

you with her secret, Rod. She is the author of *The Great Divide.*"

Lady Valeria burst out laughing.

"Don't be a fool, my dear Billy," she said. "We need not keep up that joke any longer. My little ruse has succeeded beyond my wildest expectations. Long ago, when I first read it, I suspected Mr. Steele of being the author of that much-discussed book. I detected a decided similarity of style between *The Great Divide*, and his other books. I remembered the trick played upon Sir Walter Scott, in order to induce him to confess to being the author of *Waverley*. It amused me to try it, in this case. Mr. Steele fell at once into the trap. He not only admitted the authorship, but showed me the original manuscript of *The Great Divide*. Most interesting, I assure you. I noticed a place where 'Madge' had been originally written, then crossed through and 'Katherine' substituted. *You* are evidently the heroine, Madge. One is almost tempted to ask you for news of poor Valentine."

The mocking eyes rested on Lady Hilary's troubled face.

Billy, white to the lips, turned to Steele.

"Are you the author of my wife's book?" he said.

"No, old man," said Steele, quietly. "But I am the author of my own. *The Great Divide* is mine; but, for various reasons, I chose to publish it under a pseudonym. I shall not allow my identity with Max Romer to be made public. We who are now present in this room, alone know of it. Even my publisher believes me to have sent him the typewritten work of a friend. I trust my secret, Billy, without a qualm, to Madge's honour and yours. I have already told Lady Valeria that if my identity with Max Romer ever becomes public property through her, I shall immediately make known the circumstances under which she became possessed of that knowledge, and it is only fair to warn you that my account will not bear much resemblance to the story we have just heard from Lady Valeria."

Billy passed his hand across his forehead. He seemed dazed.

"You—*you*, Max Romer, Rod?" he said. Then he turned to his wife. "But Valeria—I don't understand? How did you obtain the thousand pounds you gave to the hospital, if you have not the royalties from the sales of *The Great Divide*? Why did you——"

"Oh, don't be such an idiot, Billy!" cried Lady Valeria, sharply. "Have you no sense of

humour? You know perfectly well that it was a joke. You, yourself, practically suggested it to me, long ago. We merely filled in the details, for our own private amusement. How could I possibly have written and published a full-length novel, unknown to you? It is too silly for words to pretend that you took my fun seriously. You are putting me into an intolerable position by your utter lack of humour and of imagination. I am perfectly sick of having to explain to you that I am quite aware that c, a, t, spells 'cat,' and that I am only joking if I say it spells 'dog.' Life ceases to be worth living, when one has to spend it with a person who has no sense of humour."

As Lady Valeria's angry voice ceased its shrill crescendo, a strained silence reigned in the library.

The two who loved Billy, looked at him with anxiety.

He had winced visibly, beneath the lash of his wife's tongue.

He now pulled himself together, and rose to his feet.

"I am awfully sorry about this, Rodney," he said. "It is entirely my fault—as my wife says. I took the whole thing in sober earnest, and have made the deuce of a muddle of it. I suppose I have no sense of—of that kind of humour. It

doesn't strike me as either funny or possible that c, a, t, should spell 'dog.' But my lack of humour, and my absurd pride in what I took to be sober truth and actual fact, have landed us all in something of a quandary. My one consolation is, that I know you will not let my stupidity make any difference to our friendship. I undertake that no hint of the secret which has thus been forced from you, shall ever be given to a soul. I promise this, upon my honour; and I promise it for my wife, as well as for myself. Come, Valeria. We are starting later than we intended. We have no time to lose. Your cloak is in the hall."

The others rose to their feet, but Billy allowed them no chance to speak.

He took his wife by the arm.

"Come, Valeria," he repeated, "we have no time to lose. Good-night, Madge. Good-night, Rodney. See you again, soon, I hope."

He walked Lady Valeria to the door, opened it, and passed her into the hall. She had never been known to move so quickly.

As he turned to close the library door, Billy paused for one moment and looked back. In his face they saw shame, dismay, and despair, mingled with a grateful certainty of trust in the love and understanding of those he was leaving behind.

Then he shut the door.

A moment later the hall door closed also; the lift bell rang. The clang of the gate resounded. Then silence fell.

Madge and Rodney, left standing together in the library, turned upon one another faces of sorrowful dismay.

When at length they found speech possible, they both spoke at the same moment, and each said the same words:

"Poor old Billy!"

Then Lady Hilary sank into her chair, and lay back, listening for the sound of Billy's motor-horn in the drive below; while Steele walked over to the hearthrug, and stood looking into the red heart of the fire—that hottest place, into which Lady Valeria had dropped the crushed carnation, watching it shrivel, blacken, writhe, and disappear.

"So perish all the king's enemies!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

BILLY LEARNS THE TRUTH

AS soon as the door of the car had closed upon them, and Billy had carefully tucked the rug around his wife, he switched off the lights, and leaned back in his corner, in complete silence.

No humbly affectionate hand, lingered on hers. No eager question as to how she was feeling, came from Billy. He sat so closely into his corner of the car, that there would have been ample room for a third person between them.

Valeria's intuition, rarely at fault, warned her that she now had to deal with a side of Billy hitherto unknown to her. But her anger against Rodney Steele, and her furious mortification at her own false move and subsequent exposure, gave her scant patience for any careful manipulation of Billy. The full flood of her anger, which she had not dared to outpour upon Steele, must be vented upon somebody. It fell upon Billy, sitting

stunned and silent in his corner. They had barely passed through the iron gates, into the Marylebone Road, when she turned upon him.

"Why did you rush me out of the flat in this unheard of way, I should like to know?" she began, sharply.

Billy shivered at her voice, but made no reply.

"Can't you answer when I speak to you, silly? You had plenty to say just now, when a little tact would have taught you to hold your tongue. Why did you rush me out of the flat like this?"

"Because," said Billy, slowly, "I did not suppose that either my friend or my sister would feel able to shake hands with you, Valeria; and I did not choose that they should be placed in the impossible position of having to refuse to shake hands with my wife, in the room they were occupying as my guests."

Lady Valeria gave a little shriek of derisive laughter.

"Bravo!" she cried, and clapped her hands. "What high-flown melodrama! It more than compensates for the inconvenience of being landed breathless, in the motor. And why, pray, should your friend and your sister presume to decline to shake hands with me?"

"Because," said Billy, in a broken voice, yet with carefully weighed deliberation, "you stood revealed a thief—and a thief of the most despicable kind. Had you attempted to steal Rodney's cheque-book, or Madge's pearls, such an action would have been more easy to forgive than this attempt to steal his *nom-de-plume*, his reputation, and the glory of his fine achievement. It was a despicable theft; and you and I have got to face that out together, Valeria."

For a moment this stern, new Billy, whose desperate pain was enabling him to hold his own, and to express himself with dignity and with clearness, cowed Valeria; and, because he cowed and frightened her, she hated him even more than she had hated Steele. Yet she knew that if she really laid herself out to do so, she could easily talk Billy round, before they reached home, into believing her ingenious explanation of the evening's fiasco.

Was it worth while?

She drew off her gloves. Her hands must be ready to stroke and fondle, if necessary, that absurd clenched fist of Billy's, as she talked.

"I am sure I don't know what you mean," she said, more calmly. "You heard my perfectly

reasonable explanation just now; and, though you evidently possess neither the wits nor the sense of humour to understand it, in all its bearings, you most certainly accepted it, and admitted that you were chiefly to blame."

"Of course, I accepted your explanation, in the presence of Madge and Rodney," said Billy's sad voice, from the dark recesses of his corner. "And, of course, I endeavoured to shoulder the blame. I love you; and you are my wife. If you had committed a murder, I should do my level best to hang for it, were there no other way of securing your safety and freedom. But I accepted your explanation, only in the presence of others. Between ourselves—you and I alone together—we must face out the truth. There is no further need that you should weave elaborate lies for me."

"Now or never," whispered the demon, Valeria would have called "Diplomacy."

"Is it worth while?" suggested the demon of Contempt.

To determine the point, Valeria suddenly switched on the lights, leaned forward, and looked at Billy.

Billy's face was stern and set; but the usual freckles were visible on Billy's nose.

This tendency to freckle, in season and out of season, was a peculiarity of Billy's which had already served to annoy Valeria. An hour's skating in bright sunshine — even the pale, wintry sun of England — was quite sufficient to pepper Billy's countenance with a wholly unseasonable sprinkling of gay little sandy freckles.

Leaning forward in the car, Valeria saw the freckles on Billy's rather inadequate nose. The sight suddenly turned her contempt into loathing; her fear of him, into reckless fury.

"You fool!" she said. "You stupid, senseless fool! Why should I trouble to lie to you?"

Then she poured forth upon Billy, the pent-up torrent of invective, which had been held in check by the stern force of Steele's masterful personality.

Billy knew the language of public-school and college; of the mess-room and the barracks; of camp and battlefield. He had heard the proverbial trooper swear. But never, in his whole life, had he heard such language as now fell in a reckless torrent from the lips of Lady Valeria.

At first he tried to stop her. Then, finding that useless, he turned up his coat-collar, leaned farther

back in his corner, and tried not to hear the shrill voice of his wife.

But the vileness of her language, and the intolerable pain of her galling words, became more than even Billy could bear.

He took out his watch.

"Look here, Valeria," he said. "I give you two minutes to control yourself and cease talking. If, when two minutes are up, you are not silent, I shall stop the car, get out, and return to town, leaving you to go home alone. I mean it, Valeria."

Lady Valeria made full use of the first minute. The end of the second, found her lying back in sullen silence, feigning an exhausted sleep.

Billy switched off the lights, let down the window, and looked up at the stars, shining in a frosty sky. The heavy scent of violets oppressed him. He could hardly breathe in the atmosphere of the closed car.

Presently, the lights of London were left behind. The motor sped along country roads. Fir-trees showed dark against the evening sky. Holly-berries, in flashes of scarlet, frost, like countless diamonds, upon the hedges, gleamed and sparkled in the powerful head-lights, as the car flew on.

Lady Valeria coughed.

Billy put up the window.

Presently he heard a sound which made his heart stand still. It came from the slight figure, all muffled in her furs, in the other corner. A spasmodic, hysterical sound. It seemed to resemble uncontrollable sobbing, with difficulty held in check. Was Valeria weeping?"

The thought was more than Billy's tender heart could bear. He laid his hand upon her muff.

"Don't cry, Valeria," he said, huskily. "I can't have you cry."

Lady Valeria sat up, and gave vent to a ripple of merriment.

"I am not crying," she said. "I never cry. I'm laughing."

"Laughing?"

"Yes, laughing. You can call it 'suppressed laughter,' in the stage directions, when you write your melodrama."

"And why are you laughing, Valeria?"

"Because your friend has given himself away, so deliciously. First of all, in allowing me to see your sister's name figuring in the rough draft of his 'fine achievement.' Next, by telling me that the main incident of the book is not true to life. He must mean by this, that no girl would have broken with a man for the cause which is there given as Katherine's reason for throwing over

Valentine. Therefore, it is easy to deduce that something, even more scandalous, must have come between Rodney Steele and your excellent sister. I shall make it my business to find out what it was."

"I forbid you to do anything of the kind," said Billy.

"*Darling* Billy," murmured Lady Valeria, "you are too amusing!"

The car sped on into the darkness; over wide commons, through pine-woods; along narrow lanes.

Billy wrestled silently with the hard problem now sternly confronting him. How was he to reconstruct the shattered fabric of his short-lived happiness?

Although Valeria's suppressed sobs, had proved to be derisive laughter; although he knew the term of endearment she had used, had been spoken in sarcasm; yet both had taken effect upon Billy's susceptible nature.

His indignation was weakening. His righteous anger had burned itself out.

He yearned to put his arm around her, to find some little comfort from physical contact, in this great barren waste of mental and moral desolation.

Nothing could alter the fact that she was his wife, and that they loved each other. Nothing

altered another fact which, since he knew of it, had been a source of such pride to Billy; a cause of so much tender solicitude; but which now filled him with a sense of shame and dismay. Yet, might it not partly account for Valeria's extraordinary lapse from rectitude and honour?

He tried to find her hand within her muff.

"Darling," he said, "anyway, there is one little crumb of comfort for me, in this miserable business."

"What is that?" murmured Lady Valeria. "I did not have much tea, Billy. Share your crumb with me."

"Why, when I thought you had written *The Great Divide*, I was half afraid Valentine was a man you had loved before we met—before I won you. I didn't know how to bear that you should have loved any other man, perhaps more than you loved me, Valeria."

Then Billy's wife turned upon him, with a cruel shriek of laughter.

"Oh, you poor, fatuous fool!" she cried. "I have never loved any man—neither you nor another! You say that there is no further need that I should weave elaborate lies for you? Very well, then. Hear the truth. I have never loved you! Never! Of course, you will now ask the

usual senseless question: 'Then why did you marry me?' I not only forestall it, but I will answer it. I married you because you bored me one degree less than other men. I married you because I knew I could get my own way completely, with very little effort to myself. I married you because I was sick of being important, yet poor; too poor to live up to the position which by right of birth and up-bringing was mine. At my father's death, the death-duties practically ruined us. We had to let Beaucourt, and live at the Dower House. If I was asked to open a bazaar, I could not afford the price of a new frock in which to grace the function; still less could I make a grand tour of the stalls, spending freely at each. My dress-allowance barely kept me in gloves! Now I will tell you what I wanted! I wanted a beautiful country place; a flat in town; horses, motor-cars, new gowns; the power and prestige which rank cannot give, unless united to wealth. By my marriage with you, I secured all these. The price I had to pay was a fairly easy price. I am quite fond of you, my good Billy, and have you well in hand. You come to heel, without a whimper, if I do but lift a finger. I appreciate your devotion. But—love you? Good heavens, no!"

Lady Valeria laughed again. She no longer felt cowed by Billy.

Yet his first remark was not what she expected.

"And you—*you!*—will be the mother of my son!"

The horror and aversion in his voice, stung Valeria into a yet fuller impulse of unusual candour.

"Indeed, I shall not!" she said. "I hate children. I have not the slightest expectation or intention of ever having any."

"Then that was also a lie?"

"That—as you so politely put it—was also a lie. Your attentive care of me seemed to be somewhat on the wane. It suited me, by means of a few gentle hints, to give it a fresh stimulus, and to provide you, temporarily, with a little pleasurable expectation. That was all."

"Thank God!" said Billy; and putting down the window, he leaned forward and lifted a despairing face toward the stars.

The car sped up the avenue.

The old Manor House came into view. Lights shone brightly from its windows. Its gables and chimneys stood out against the frosty sky.

The footman sprang from his seat beside the chauffeur, and rang the bell.

Then, as the great doors were flung wide, and a flood of golden light streamed down the steps, he opened the door of the car, drew out the rug, and stood waiting.

Lady Valeria stepped daintily out, and mounted the stone steps, dropping dead carnations on the way. Then with a smile of pure enjoyment at sight of the huge log fire in the hall, she let fall her fur cloak from her shoulders, and advanced, both hands outstretched, to the glowing warmth of the blaze.

But the man whose home she had desecrated, whose love she had scorned, whose life she had done her best to wreck, stood outside in the frosty night, uncertain whether to follow her in, to the place he could no longer call "home," or to re-enter his car, and order his chauffeur to return at high-speed to town.

CHAPTER XXIX

DISCORD IN RODNEY'S ORCHESTRA

THE two who remained together in the library, after the hurried departure of Billy and Lady Valeria from the flat, though filled with sadness and consternation, experienced a sense of relief, and of exceeding calm after tempest.

Their mutual concern over Billy, held their minds at first from any constraint which might have arisen owing to the fact that they thus found themselves so unexpectedly alone together.

Their own strained relations could not stand between them, while the instinct was so strong to draw near to one another, in the comfort of a complete understanding of the heavy blow which had fallen upon poor Billy — a blow which their love for him had been powerless to avert.

Rodney, turning from his silent contemplation of the fire, met the question in Lady Hilary's anxious eyes, and told her, in response thereto, exactly what had passed between Lady Valeria and himself.

As they sat thus, in quiet conversation, a sense of exceeding restfulness came to Rodney. There was a depth of understanding in Madge's every look and word, which enveloped him in an atmosphere of trust and sympathy—a new experience, after the long years of standing always alone, of facing every situation without the comfort of consultation with another's mind; the mental companionship of one who cared and who could understand.

Madge did not blame Rodney for having felt it necessary to take so decisive a step; yet her heart sank within her, as she realised its full import.

"I fear we have made a dangerous enemy," she said; "there is peril in Valeria's friendship; there is disaster in her enmity."

"She can do us no harm, Madge. I have her well muzzled. If *she* speaks, *I* speak. She is clever enough to know that she stands to lose more in the long run, than I."

"Valeria is not so clever as she seems, Rodney.

I have known her make inconceivably stupid blunders, while apparently working with the utmost artfulness to secure her own ends. In the bitterness of this mortification, she will probably throw prudence to the winds in her desire to punish you and me for her exposure. Unless her temper leads her into further self-betrayal, she is now twisting Billy's honest mind around her taper fingers. She will have him convinced and on her side, before they reach the Manor. I am sorry to say it, but my brother's wife is a woman utterly without either heart or conscience."

"How on earth did Billy come to marry her?"

"Billy succumbed to the strong physical attraction which Valeria can exert when she chooses. There is something feline about it. On the few occasions upon which I saw them together during their engagement, Valeria always reminded me of a cat playing with a mouse. Billy was infatuated. I tried to warn him, to dissuade him, with the sole result that I came within an ace of losing Billy's affection. I dared not risk that, any farther, knowing there would come a time when Billy would stand sorely in need of a love which would not fail him."

"Has she ever really cared for him?"

"My dear Roddie, Valeria has never really

loved any creature on this earth, save herself! She loved the luxuries Billy could give her; she enjoyed the devotion he lavished upon her. She purred most sweetly while Billy, in the seventh heaven of a lover's bliss, stroked and petted her. But I always knew there were claws concealed behind those velvet pads; and I greatly fear my poor Billy will find himself with those claws in his faithful heart, one of these days."

"Billy—of all people!" said Steele; and they fell silent, over the pity of it; looking into the fire, and wondering how matters were going with Billy at that moment.

Presently Lady Hilary exclaimed impulsively:

"Ah, how I hate to have had to speak so, of Valeria. One longs to believe the best, to think the best, to speak the best, of everybody. Let us hope I am mistaken. Let us believe there is good in her, which I have failed to discover. Should her name come up at Mrs. Bellamy's table, to-morrow, we are certain to hear good, and only good, of Valeria."

Rodney smiled.

"'God is love,'" he said. "At least, so the late bishop would have remarked, before holding forth upon the intricate subject of the morals and manners of the Lady Valeria."

"So you know the bishop's motto? Don't laugh at it, Rodney. It has helped me over many a rough place."

A long silence fell between them. Her last remark had turned their thoughts upon each other and themselves. To the minds of both came the remembrance of the rough place over which they had stumbled together, the last time they met. The roughness had been of Rodney's own making; yet he had not put out a hand to help her.

He looked at her; and, as he looked, a gnawing ache of compunction, misery, fierce regret, awoke within him.

Why had he no "best" to lay at the feet of this noble woman, so worthy of a man's entire devotion? Why had Fate wrenched her from him, when he would have been able to give her all; restoring her to him now, when it was too late? During all the intervening years, he had held himself faithful to the love he had given to the girl of his choice; but that love had been as a dead thing, shrined; not a living thing which could grow with his growth, adapting itself to his expanding needs and interests; always put first, even in the midst of his manhood's strivings and ambitions. And, even could he now take it from its niche, and interweave it with his daily life,

was his boyish adoration of a lovely girl a thing worthy of the acceptance of so glorious a woman as Madge had become? Did it not rather belong to the hayfields, the sweet-brier lanes, and the wild-rose bowers of youth?

His own heart perplexed him. He could not understand the gnawing hunger of need, the fierce pang of regret, which he felt as he looked at Lady Hilary and then mentally surveyed his carefully shrined love for Madge. Even when severed from Madge, almost on the eve of their wedding, he had not suffered torment such as this.

As he gazed and brooded in sombre perplexity, she turned unexpectedly from her contemplation of the fire, and her steadfast eyes, calm and serene, looked full into his.

Steele rose, and took his stand upon the hearthrug.

"Madge," he said, "I am sorry. I am ashamed; I am perplexed. I am furious with myself. I am still more furious with Fate. Everything is in a hopeless jumble. Life is chaos. Shall I tell you of what it reminds me?

"Last time I was in Florence I was keen to hear Dagmara Renina, a young Russian prima donna with a voice of extraordinary beauty and promise, sing the part of the Goose-girl in *Figli Di Re*.

I had to be off, before the first night; so was invited to attend the final dress rehearsal.

"When it was nearly time for the performance to begin, I left my friend the tenor in his dressing-room, and made my way round to the front.

"I took my seat in the stalls of the huge empty opera-house. The members of the orchestra were all in their places. Pandemonium reigned! Each man was playing little snatches of the score before him; all in the same key, but with no attempt at time, tune, or order. The piping of the flute, the sighing of the fiddle, the grunt of the double-bass, the clear call of the cornet, the bray of the trombones, all went on together. Each man practised some particular phrase he wished to perfect. The confused hubbub of sound was indescribable.

"Suddenly a slim, alert figure leapt upon the estrade, and struck the desk sharply with a baton. It was the maestro!

"Instantly the hubbub hushed into silence.

"There followed a moment of tense expectation. Every eye was bent upon that alert figure; every instrument was held in perfect readiness.

"The maestro adjusted his score; looked to the right, looked to the left; then raised his baton

—and lo! full, rich, sweet, melodious, blending in perfect harmony, sounded the opening chords of the overture.

"Madge, I feel just now like that great orchestra, before the maestro entered and took control. I have the will for harmony. Each part of me is honestly doing its best. Yet all within is hopeless hubbub and confusion. I know but two things, of a certainty. The one, throbs and thunders like the beat of the kettle-drums. The other, sounds clear, as the silver cornet, above the general hurly-burly. The first is: that I will never forgive the woman whose slanderous tongue came between us. The second: that I will never, to satisfy any selfish need of my own nature, offer you a second best."

Lady Hilary made no immediate reply.

Her hands were folded upon her knees. Her eyes gazed steadily into the fire.

Presently she said: "You are waiting for the Maestro, Roddie. I do not know how He will deal with the cornet; but He will have to silence the beat of that kettle-drum in your life's orchestra, if there is to be harmony in its music."

"Where is the maestro who could do that?" he asked.

She smiled, but let the question pass.

"His baton will reduce chaos to order, with a measure of three beats."

"Three beats?"

"Yes; three almighty beats. The bishop's motto: 'God is Love.' "

He laughed, and shook his head.

"I think not, Madge. I left off pricking texts, when I was five; and gave up painting them, when I was nine."

"It is not what *you* do to the texts, Rodney; it is what the texts do to you."

He smiled again, his eyes upon her face.

He liked to hear her argue. He did not care to differ. What did it matter whether he was right, or she?

How lovely she was!

What did anything matter in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, so long as she sat here, in this quiet library, on his side of the wall.

Then Lady Hilary looked up, and met his eyes.

A sudden flush, flooded the loveliness of her face.

She rose to her feet.

"Oh, I must be going!" she said.

"Wait," said Rodney, huskily. "Wait, Madge! You said I might ask you any questions. Who gives you those lilies you wear so constantly?"

"Nobody gives them to me, Rodney. I grow them in my own little greenhouse, at Haslemere."

"Oh!—Well, who was the fellow with lilies in his buttonhole who came to your box, at the play, last night?"

"My dear Roddie, the questions I allow you to ask, concern you and me. They do not include an inventory of all my friends."

"You might spare me a public exhibition of your intimacy with other men, while I am kept at arm's length."

Her eyes grew amused and tender.

"Roddie, you talk as an unreasonable and angry little boy might talk. When have I kept you at arm's length?"

"I hate the thought of all these other men. And I never for a moment believed that the lilies were given you by Billy."

"I have told you, dear, that the lilies are of my own growing. Do not hurt me and yourself by being unreasonable, Rodney."

He turned to the mantelpiece, and gripped it with both hands.

"Can't you understand how I have suffered?" he said. "Can't you understand the torture, to me, of the thought of all those years when you belonged to Hilary?"

She stood behind him in silence for a few moments. Then she spoke; and a great tenderness thrilled in the low music of her voice.

"Oh, my poor Roddie," she said. "Don't suffer more than you need. Dear—it is so difficult to explain! There are things one cannot say, even to—even to the man one loves. But, if you knew all—indeed there was very little, in those sad, miserable years, which need cause you any pain."

He did not answer, or look at her. He still gripped the mantelpiece, his face averted.

She waited a moment; then moved toward the door.

"Well, I must go," she said. "Good-bye, Roddie."

Then he swung round and faced her.

"What?" he said. "Going? Without even shaking hands!"

She came swiftly back to where he stood.

"Roddie dear, truly you are unreasonable. You, yourself, said that you felt you could not shake hands with me. I made it quite easy for you this afternoon, even though we had to meet before Billy and Valeria, by coming gaily in, with both hands occupied while I gave my greetings. I shall do the same at Mrs. Bellamy's to-morrow

night. I will do all I can to help you, Roddie. But I cannot have you unjust and unreasonable."

He looked at her with hungry eyes.

"You keep me at arm's length," he muttered, "though once you were my own."

"Then shake hands, if you wish," said Lady Hilary, and held out a beautiful, ungloved hand toward him.

Rodney looked at it, hesitated; then slowly, deliberately, took it in his own.

She let her hand rest in his grasp for a few moments, then gently withdrew it.

"Now, I must really go. Good-bye, Roddie."

Turning, she walked swiftly to the door. But Rodney was there before her.

Catching her in his arms, he kissed her hair, her eyes, her lips, her throat, and then her lips again.

She did not attempt to resist him; but neither did she return his kisses. She stood passive within those straining arms, with white face and averted eyes; silent, motionless.

He caught her closer, pressing her head against his breast; then, stooping, kissed once again those unresisting lips.

Then, with a groan, he let fall his arms from about her, walked back to the mantelpiece, folded

his arms upon it, and laid his forehead upon them.

Not a word had been spoken. No word was spoken then.

In absolute silence, Lady Hilary left the room.

CHAPTER XXX

THE BATON OF THE MAESTRO

AT nine o'clock on that same evening, Steele rang the bell of the flat below.

"Can I see Mrs. Bellamy for a few minutes?" he asked.

Prudence smiled a welcome.

"Step in, sir, if you please. My mistress is in the drawing-room."

The bishop's widow sat very close to the crayon portrait, knitting a stocking.

"Come in," she said. "Come in, and welcome, my dear Mr. Steele! At that very moment my thoughts were with you. I was thinking how pleasant an evening, you and Madge Hilary and I will be spending together, at this time to-morrow."

Rodney held the outstretched hand, for a moment, in both his own; then sat down upon a low seat close beside her.

"I am awfully sorry, Mrs. Bellamy," he said;

"but I have come to tell you I can't come. I find myself obliged to leave here at once. An unavoidable change of plans. I am very sorry."

The bishop's widow went on with her knitting. She did not need to look again at the dark face close beside her. A first glance had shown her that deep trouble of mind had brought him to her.

"That is a disappointment, my dear," she said. "But we must look upon our little dinner together, as a pleasure merely deferred. Do you expect to be away for long?"

"I don't know."

"Where are you going?"

"I am not sure. Somewhere wild and desolate; away from walls, and houses, and chimneys; where winds will blow, and wild birds will swoop and circle, and where I shall be able to walk, and walk, and walk—alone with earth, and sky, and sea."

"Who has given you so sudden and so deep a hurt, dear boy?"

"Nobody," he said. "Why should you think I am hurt? I have lived so long with nature, wild and untrammelled These walls seem a prison. I must break away, and go free."

"These walls did not seem a prison, yesterday. You were happy and content. A glad, free heart sets the bounds of its own limitless horizon. Must you carry your trouble away into solitude, or can you share it with an old woman who truly cares for you? Do whatever will help you most, my dear."

Rodney bent his head, until his forehead almost rested against the arm of Mrs. Bellamy's chair.

Then he said, very low: "I have failed where I thought I was strongest."

"That is precisely where we usually do fail. Simon Peter was perfectly certain that, though all the rest forsook the Master, he would stand firm; yet a few hours later he was denying, with oaths and curses, that he had any knowledge of his Lord. The Bishop used to say: 'When your strongest point has become your weakest, then your weakest can be made truly strong.' Life's lessons often have to be learned through deep discouragement; only, we must see to it that we do not allow discouragement to drift into despair."

Rodney made no reply. He was wishing he could tell the bishop's widow everything, yet knew he could tell her nothing.

At last: "I feel like Valentine, in the closing

scene of *The Great Divide*," he said. "Do you remember? The scene you do not like; in which he stands with folded arms, despairing, on a rock, at the end of all things."

"I told you that scene would do harm," said the bishop's widow, sadly. "It has done you harm. Max Romer's score will be a heavy one. You are the second person, within forty-eight hours, in whom I have noticed the baleful effect of that unfortunate book."

Rodney smiled—a rather uneasy, twisted smile.

"Who was the other victim?" he asked.

"Madge Hilary. I could not but be conscious yesterday that the bright hopefulness of that brave spirit was somewhat dimmed; and when I questioned her, she had to confess that she had just finished reading *The Great Divide*. There will be a day of reckoning for Max Romer!"

"Oh, draw it mild," said Rodney. "A fellow must write of life as he has found it. I daresay Max Romer has plenty of dead beasts of his own to depress him."

"That provides no excuse for inflicting them upon other people. But there is one wild beast which dies harder than any other."

"What is that?"

"Self," said the bishop's widow; and taking up

her knitting, she bent her mind upon a careful counting of the stitches.

"Why should Self have to die?" questioned Rodney. "Self is an essential in the life of every man. Self-respect, self-esteem, self-command, self-sufficiency, self-defence, self-assertion, self-reliance, self-possession. Are not all these, important weapons in the armoury of a man who has to hold his own and to win his way in the world?"

The bishop's widow laid down her knitting. Woman-like, she seized upon one point in Steele's contention, ignoring all the rest.

"There should be no such thing in life," she said, "as self-sufficiency."

"How do you make that out?"

"'None of us liveth to himself,'" quoted Mrs. Bellamy. "That is the most important axiom of the Christian religion. If you desire its antithesis, you find it in Hosea: 'A wild ass, alone by himself.'"

Rodney laughed; then realised that the bishop's widow had spoken with the most complete seriousness. He instantly relegated the joke of the wild ass to some future time and place, for full enjoyment, and took up the argument with due gravity.

"A lonely man," he said, "must live to himself alone. His loneliness forces him into self-sufficiency."

"Say rather," replied Mrs. Bellamy, "the sin of self-sufficiency has brought about his loneliness. I remember hearing the Bishop address a great crowd of miners, upon this subject. It was in the open-air. He stood before them, on a rock.

" 'My friends,' he said, 'we Englishmen are the only people who spell the personal pronoun singular with a capital "I." As I stand here before you'—the Bishop was tall and erect—'my very figure denotes the capital "I." It is only as I stretch wide my arms thus, in Self-crucifixion, that the capital "I" becomes a "T," standing for Thee, my Lord, and Those whom Thou hast given me, that I may minister to Them. In this lay the secret of the power of the Christ-life. He walked this earth with open arms, embracing in a divine compassion all who needed help and healing. He died upon the Cross, with arms outstretched, completing the self-sacrifice which redeemed the world. He ascended into heaven, with hands spread wide in blessing. If your life is to be a power,' said the Bishop, 'you must learn the secret contained in St. Paul's mighty statement: "I am crucified with Christ: never-

theless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me."'

"I can see the Bishop now," said Mrs. Bellamy, "standing upon a rock, the golden sunset behind him, the keen faces of the Cornish miners all around. What a contrast to the final scene in *The Great Divide*, where the man, absorbed in his own selfish sorrow, stands lonely, with folded arms, surrounded by death and desolation."

Steele, sitting with bent head, his chin in his hands, made no answer.

The bishop's widow took up her knitting, and again softly counted the stitches.

Presently Rodney said: "The other day somebody, with whom I was discussing the book, suggested a better ending to *The Great Divide*."

"What was that?"

"That after ten years of separation, Katherine and Valentine should meet again. The man she married had meanwhile died. She was free. She had never really been able to put away her love for Valentine. She had soon come to realise her mistake in sending him from her. He had remained faithful during the intervening years.

So they made it up, married, and—it is to be supposed—lived happily ever after!"

"Eighteen, nineteen, twenty," said Mrs. Bellamy. Then she smiled.

"A charming ending," she said. "Max Romer should write a sequel."

"I disputed its feasibility," said Steele. "The man's loss of faith in a woman's love, had driven him into what you call 'the sin of self-sufficiency.' His memory of the girl had been shrined in his heart, as a beautiful dead thing, to be regretfully contemplated in morbid moments. His love for her was not a vital force, influencing his actions, growing with his growth, maturing as he matured. How could Valentine, if suddenly confronted with a noble woman developed and matured, as Katherine would undoubtedly have matured and developed, offer her this old love he had felt for the girl of long ago?"

"Obviously, he could not," said Mrs. Bellamy.

"Then away goes your happy ending! The last state of that man is worse than the first."

"Not at all, my dear Mr. Steele! I can show you a more excellent way."

"What is that?"

Mrs. Bellamy laid down her knitting.

"My dear, it is evident. He must begin again

at the beginning, and fall in love with the woman, just as years before he fell in love with the girl."

"Might not his—self-sufficiency render that impossible?"

Mrs. Bellamy took up a beautifully bound volume of Tennyson's poems, which lay upon the table close to her hand, turned to a certain page, and softly read, without comment:

"*Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all the chords with might;*
Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, pass'd in music out of sight."

As the tender words fell on his ear, Rodney recalled his own illustration of the waiting orchestra, producing a noisy hubbub of confused, discordant sounds, before the coming of the maestro.

Was Love the maestro?

Had his life's discords lasted too long to hush into silence, or to blend into harmony, in response to the beat of even that magic baton?

He dropped his head upon his hands.

There was comfort in silence.

The bishop's widow seemed to realise this.

She spoke no word; but her silent thought of him, merged itself into uplifted prayer.

Presently she laid her hand very gently upon the dark head beside her.

"My dear," she said, "may I cease discussing fiction, and speak to you, for one moment, of fact? The self-centred life narrows year by year, until at last it closes in a lonely end, and in the narrow compass of a six-foot grave. The life which gives itself to another, which lives for another, which puts another first, is widened out, not only toward that other, but toward all mankind. This is, of course, an essential truth of the spiritual kingdom; but it applies also to the natural man. It pleased God, long ago, to take from me my little children; and now He has seen fit to leave me without the comfort of my husband's presence, for a time. Yet, because I loved my own three so tenderly, my heart now opens to take in all little children; and because my husband's love meant so much to me, I can sympathise with others, both in their joys and in their sorrows. The very first Divine statement made concerning man was this: 'It is not good that the man should be alone.' That genesis of truth is as true now as it was six thousand years ago, when first it found expression. It may not be given to every man to find his full completion

in the perfect love of a good woman. But those to whom it is offered should think well and carefully, before they put from them so great a gift."

A small French time-piece, over the fire-place, struck the hour of ten. A clock in the hall, in reverberant tones, distinctly reminiscent of the palace, boomed forth its deep note ten times. Away in the far distance, Rodney heard the well-known chimes, to which he had so often listened.

He lifted his head.

"Thank you," he said. "You have done me heaps of good. I was bothered about a story of mine, of which I have made a mess. I think I begin to see now, where my mistakes came in."

He rose and stood before her.

"I am off this evening," he said, "by a midnight train. I carry with me the remembrance of your great kindness. May I also take with me your blessing?"

Rising, she took his hand between both her own, looking up into his face with a wistful tenderness.

"God bless you, my dear boy," she said, "and lead you in the right way, and prepare you for whatever the future holds in store. And now, for the sake of a dear mother who must have loved you tenderly, and of my own little son, who would have been about your age, kiss me before you go."

So Rodney stooped, and kissed the bishop's widow; and that kiss seemed to purge his heart from the burning shame of his lapse into unrestrained passion; and her blessing sent him out to his self-imposed exile, conscious of a ray of hope, shining, clear and bright, into the shrouded future.

CHAPTER XXXI

INTO THE DESERT

AS the clock chimed the quarter-past ten, Rodney stood expectant beside the telephone.

The minutes passed slowly.

The insistent little bell remained mute.

He walked up and down the hall.

There was sometimes a delay in getting through.

The clock chimed the half-hour.

Then Rodney walked quietly down the passage to his room.

Madge was not going to ring him up.

At eleven o'clock he stood in the hall, his bag beside him.

He wrote an address upon a slip of paper, and rang the bell.

"I do not know how long I shall be away, Jake," he said. "Here is an address to which you can send letters. I am leaving my things here. Should I want them, I will send for

them. I may turn up any day; or I may not come back at all. If any questions are asked, say I have gone on a walking-tour. If they then remark that a walking-tour in December, is unusual; say the world would be a dull place if we always did the obvious. Add that you have noticed that people will pay any price for asparagus and strawberries, green-peas, or white lilac, out of season; so why not walking-tours? . . . Keep that address to yourself, if possible. I do not want to be bothered with letters, though I must have my business papers. . . . Don't look so much concerned, my good fellow. You and Mrs. Jake have made me most comfortable. But I can't stand town. The gulls have unsettled me! I want wild marshes, cliffs, and sea."

Jake helped him into his overcoat; took up the bag, opened the door, and rang the lift-bell.

At the entrance to the lift, Rodney hesitated.

"Here, Jake! Go on with my bag, and put it into a taxi. I will follow in a couple of minutes."

Turning back into the hall, he closed the door.

He took down the telephone-book, and found Lady Hilary's number.

He was through almost immediately.

"Hullo?"

"Yes?" It was Madge's voice.

Rodney took off his hat, and dropped it on to the chair beside him.

"Are you there?" he said, huskily.

"Yes, Roddie. I am here."

"Madge! Can you forgive me?"

"Yes, dear. Fully and freely. I understood."

"I am going away."

"I thought that was probably what you would do, Rodney?"

"I couldn't go without your forgiveness."

"You have it."

"Good-bye, Madge."

"Good-night, Roddie."

He rang off; took up his hat; stood for a moment looking round the cosy hall—which suddenly seemed so much more "home" than he had realised; then ran down the stairs, and jumped into the waiting taxi.

Just as it moved off he leaned out, and looked up at Madge's windows.

The curtains were closely drawn, but it seemed to Rodney that a faint golden radiance shone through them.

Half-way to the station it struck him suddenly that, though he had said "Good-bye," Madge had said only "Good-night."

There was comfort in this thought.

CHAPTER XXXII

"SO PERISH ALL THE KING'S ENEMIES!"

LADY HILARY sat at her writing-table, late in the afternoon of the day after Rodney's departure.

She heard the door-bell, and wished, when too late, that she had refused herself to visitors.

The drawing-room door opened and closed.

She pushed back her chair and rose to receive her visitor; wondering, for an instant, who could be entering unannounced.

Then, from behind the screen, came Billy—Billy, so stern and white, that Lady Hilary's heart stood still at sight of him.

"Billy!" she said. "Dear Billy, what is it? Oh, tell me! Come over here. Sit down beside the fire. What is it, Billy?"

Billy sat down; looked at his sister; moistened his dry lips; twice tried to speak; then, still silent, turned and stared into the fire.

Lady Hilary sat down.

"Dear Billy," she said.

Then Billy spoke.

"Valeria did not write *The Great Divide*," he said.

"We knew that yesterday, Billy," said Lady Hilary, gently. "It is dreadfully hard for you, old boy. But we must try to make allowances. Only we three know of it; and you can rely upon Rodney and me——"

But Billy ignored the interruption. He did not seem to hear it.

"Valeria did not *write* 'The Great Divide,'" he said, still staring steadily into the fire; "but she has crossed it."

"What on earth do you mean, Billy?" cried Lady Hilary.

"Valeria is dead," said Billy, in a slow, monotonous voice.

"Dead! Valeria dead!"

"Yes, Madge. They found her dead this morning, when they went to her room. The doctor says it was an overdose of her sleeping stuff. Oh, no! Not intentionally. Valeria would not have done that. She was far too fond of herself and of life. There is absolutely no suggestion of it being other than an accident. Don't look so horrified. I am sorry if I have told you too abruptly. May

I tell you exactly what happened, Madge? Then you will understand.

"We had an awful time in the car, going home. I don't think I need tell you about that. I pray God I may forget it; yet I know I never can.

"When we reached the Manor, Valeria walked straight in. I saw her go towards the fire, with her hands outstretched; and I saw Morris stoop to pick up her sables, which she had dropped as she entered.

"I stood outside, uncertain whether to follow Valeria into the house, or to jump into the car and run back to town.

"Then I heard a sudden fearful scream. I dashed up the steps and into the hall.

"Valeria had fallen forward on to the fire, both hands right among the blazing logs. You know her way of walking with her hands stretched out in front of her? Either she tripped on the tiger-skin, or, coming straight into the heat out of the frosty air, made her suddenly giddy; we don't know which. But, anyway, there she was with her hands in the flames. Morris ran fast enough; but I got to her first. I picked her up and placed her in a chair. There had not been time for her clothes to catch fire.

"We telephoned to Birkett. Her hands were

very painful; but the injuries were not serious. Birkett dressed her hands with extreme care, and ordered her to bed at once, because of the shock. He had rather a tough time with her. You know Valeria never could bear pain. I am afraid at last Birkett rather lost patience. Valeria asked over and over again whether her hands would be permanently scarred. Birkett put her off, for a long time; but at last he told her, straight out, that of course her hands would be scarred; but that he hoped, with care, she would soon regain the full use of them.

"Valeria screamed when she heard that her hands would be scarred. You know how she loved her hands?

"Birkett went away, shortly after. He said she was to be kept very quiet, and he left a sleeping draught behind, in case the pain kept her awake.

"I only heard of this, after Birkett had gone. It made me very uneasy, because I felt sure he did not know of the stuff Valeria was already in the habit of taking. I went to her room and begged her not to take Birkett's draught. Her only reply was to shout for her maid, and take it immediately.

"I then suggested sitting up with her; but she was very much annoyed with me, Madge, and ordered me out of the room. The doctor had

said she must not be excited; so I had no choice but to go. I charged the maid to sit up with her.

"An hour later, she ordered the maid to bed. Then she must have taken a double dose of her stuff. We found her dead, in the morning, her bandaged hands spread out upon the silken quilt."

"Billy, Billy," said Madge, brokenly. "Oh, my poor, dear, old Billy!"

"The doctors think," continued Billy, in the same dull, monotonous voice, "that the first dose of her stuff, taken so soon after Birkett's draught, made her rather silly; and that she took the overdose, without in the least knowing what she was doing. It appears her heart was weak. That is why the Beaucourt man, who knew her well, warned me to be careful. I used to sit up for hours, to keep her from taking her doses too near together."

Billy paused. Then he looked at his sister, his eyes heavy with misery.

"I—I did my best for Valeria, Madge."

Lady Hilary's tears overflowed.

"I know you did, Billy dear. You were wonderful."

"No; I wasn't wonderful. I was hopelessly

commonplace. But I loved her; and, until yesterday, I thought she loved me."

"Until yesterday?"

"Yesterday she told me she had never loved me. She had married me because of all the things she wanted, and which I could give her. She never loved me. I bored her less than other men; that was all."

"Oh, Billy!"

"The last words she said to me were: 'Go away, can't you!' And the last words her maid heard her say, were: 'Oh, my wonderful hands! My wonderful hands!'"

"Poor Valeria!" murmured Lady Hilary.

"Her people arrived to-day," continued Billy. "They reached the Manor at two o'clock. I came off soon after. I couldn't stand it. They talk against her, her own mother talks against her, in the very room where she is lying dead. You know the old saying: 'Of the dead speak only good.' Well, Valeria is the only person I know, to whom that meant nothing. She used to run down the dead, just as freely as she ran down the living. And now they do it of her. I simply can't stand it. The Duchess came over at three, and gave them a good jacketing. They won't forget in a hurry, the piece of the Duchess's mind which was

presented to them in most unmistakable language. I am to go to Overdene directly after the funeral. Until then I suppose I must be at the Manor. But I want you to come back with me, Madge. I can't face Valeria's family, alone."

"Of course I will come, Billy. I can be packed and ready in a quarter of an hour."

Lady Hilary rose. Action was a relief. Words of comfort or of sympathy seemed so hopelessly impossible. There was nothing to say.

"Come and sit with Nanny while I get ready," she said; and hastened on, to prepare the faithful old nurse for Billy's terrible news.

Lady Hilary had scarcely contrived to whisper it, before Billy appeared in the doorway.

"Come in, my dear, come in," said the old woman.

Billy tried to smile, as he crossed the floor to where she sat in a low nursery chair.

"Hullo, Nanny!" he said.

Then his eye fell on the work-basket he and Valeria had chosen together and given as a joint present to his old nurse, just before their wedding. He had wanted it to be blue, because that was old Nanny's favourite colour; but Valeria had insisted upon rose-carnation. He put out his hand, unsteadily, and touched it.

"She's dead, Nanny," he said. "My wife's dead."

Then Lady Hilary heard Billy sob, and saw old Nanny open her arms.

She went out quickly; closing the door behind her; but as she did so, she heard Billy drop to his knees beside the old nursery chair; and the well-remembered soothing sound of Nanny's voice, uplifted in consolation.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE FLAMING SWORD

THE news of the death of Lady Valeria, reached Rodney Steele in a little, out-of-the-way, fishing village, on the East Coast.

He had arrived at the primitive inn the evening before, too sleepy, after a long day's tramp in the frosty air, to pay much heed to physical discomfort.

He now sat at breakfast in a room which seemed a veritable museum of stuffed animals, wool-mats, wax flowers, samplers, and family portraits. All the latter could be ignored; but he was considerably tried by a melancholy squirrel in a square glass case, a large nut in its mouth, holding, with small stiff paws, on to a bough, and regarding him fixedly over its shoulder, with dull and glassy eyes. Stuffed fish, owls, hawks, and kestrel, also adorned the walls; but Rodney minded the squirrel most, because it recalled gay little friends of the woods, whose agile darting up and down had constituted

their chief charm. When did a squirrel pose stiffly on a bough, its tiny teeth clenched upon a varnished nut?

Rodney tried to fix his attention on the really excellent home-made bread, the kippers, and the marmalade.

He would soon be off and away amid life, free and abounding, gay in leap and frolic, mounting on joyous wing.

When will mankind understand that animal life is sacred; that to each little furry or feathered thing, its life and liberty mean as much as does the well-being of his own elaborate organism, to the man who sallies forth to catch, kill, maim, or destroy, for sport and pastime?

Rodney glanced again at the stiff, pathetic squirrel. Nobody would stuff a little dead child and sit it in a glass case, taking a perpetual bite out of a varnished penny bun!

On a chair beside him lay a newspaper, two days old.

Rodney took it up and, while glancing casually through it, came upon the news, given crudely in startling detail, of the tragic death of Lady Valeria.

He had left the inn, and walked some way along the cliff, through the crisp wintry air, before he

could bring himself really to take in or to face the full horror of this unexpected tragedy.

It is one thing to be confronted with an awful event which touches you nearly when you can turn at once and discuss it with another mind; it is another thing to have to realise it, look at it in all its bearings, taking a sane and reasonable view, when absolutely alone.

The papers mentioned the fall upon the fire, the burnt hands, and the accidental overdose of chloral; but, from the first, Steele felt convinced that Lady Valeria had taken her own life, and had been driven to this awful, irretrievable act, by the pitilessness of his exposure of her foolish pretension to the authorship of his book.

It did not occur to him that a self-centred nature never, under any circumstances, commits suicide. It does not destroy the only thing it really values.

He had not seen enough of Lady Valeria to realise fully her calm self-complacency, incapable of honest shame; the heartless callousness, which cared nothing for Billy's distress.

He could not know that, long before the Manor House was reached, Lady Valeria had been laughing gleefully over the prospect of an exposure of himself and Madge.

By her tragic death, she had become the victim

of his righteous anger. Almost, his anger ceased to appear righteous; and the woman upon whom he had wreaked it, became a martyr to his impetuous scorn.

What must Billy's feelings toward him now be? What must Madge think of him? Would either ever wish to see him again? He had been Billy's friend, Billy's guest, and at his door lay the death of Billy's wife.

A horror of loneliness was upon him as he walked.

The sun went behind dark wintry clouds. The sea became grey and angry. The gulls circled and screeched above his head.

Lady Valeria was more than avenged.

He could never return to the flat; never face Billy again; never see Madge.

How paltry and absurd the episode now seemed, which had brought about this great disaster. What on earth did it matter who laid claim to the authorship of *The Great Divide?* He had not intended ever to acknowledge it as his own work. If a vain and foolish woman chose to pretend she had written it, why should he have troubled himself to take any steps in the matter? He and Madge might have kept their own counsel, and

simply laughed together over Lady Valeria's preposterous pretensions, and Billy's pride in them.

He and Madge! Laughed together! Madge and he!

How heavenly it sounded, out in this wilderness of desolation.

His only hope of home, was in that word "together."

Of his own choice, of his own free will, he had stepped out of Paradise—but leaving the gate open; knowing, at the bottom of his heart, that he would return some day; certain that, when he did return, Madge—who always understood—would understand. But now! Lady Valeria had slammed the gate and locked it. There could be no return.

In the light of this subsequent disaster his conduct on that last afternoon at the flat, appeared hopelessly selfish. He had not considered Billy; he had shown no mercy to Billy's wife. He had acted the part of a ruthless Nemesis to that unhappy woman; and now Nemesis had overtaken his own self-centred life. It was too late to go back. Death—dark, irrevocable—blocked the way. There was nothing left for him to do, but to pass, without word or sign, out of the lives into

which his coming had brought such sorrow and desolation.

From the other side of the world he might write to Madge—No! That again would be selfish and useless. He must abide by the result of his own actions.

He had stepped out of Paradise, and Lady Valeria had most effectually closed the door behind him. Nay, more: her tragic death was as the flaming sword which turned every way, barring all possibility of re-entrance.

The fact that Death, when it steps in, places all mistakes of the past hopelessly beyond recall, constitutes one of its chief terrors; giving to it a ghastly power over poor mortal hearts. Also it can change in a moment the entire proportion of things. When the grim conqueror rides in on his pale horse, so much which seemed to matter greatly before, now matters not at all. We would give all the world to be able to say, to ears for ever closed to earthly sounds: "Forgive! Forget! I did not mean it"; or, to a heart which once would have beat responsive, but now is for ever still, knowing nothing of our agony of self-reproach: "I loved you all the time."

It is this irrevocable finality which leaves the victory with Death; until we learn to look beyond

the pale horse, to the glory of "the emerald rainbow round about the throne," and to remember that "He which sat upon the throne said: 'Behold, I make all things new.'" Then only, can we take up the triumphant question: "O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory?"

Long after nightfall, Rodney reached the town on the Norfolk coast to which he had sent his luggage, and where any letters forwarded by Jake would await him.

He arrived too late to call at the post office, but found his bag at the railway-station. Then, remembering his experience with the samplers and the melancholy squirrel, he put up at the best hotel in the place, close to the post office and almost beneath the shadow of the fine old church-tower.

He spent the evening searching the papers for fresh details, but found nothing new; save that the funeral of Lady Valeria had taken place at three o'clock in the afternoon of the previous day, and that Billy, as chief mourner, had been accompanied by his sister, Lady Hilary.

Tired out in body, and sick at heart, Rodney went up to his room.

In the hall he passed a gay group of young men and girls, bidding one another good-night.

"And to-morrow," cried one of the girls, in a voice of jubilant gaiety, "to-morrow will be Christmas-eve! I shall hang up my stocking. I don't care if it is babyish! Last year, Santa Claus gave me a wrist-watch. This year I shall whisper up the chimney, that I want a pearl pendant! Good-night, everybody!"

Rodney mounted the stairs.

Christmas-eve? Why, of course. To-day was the 23rd. He had lost all count of times and seasons, of days and weeks.

So the day after to-morrow would be Christmas Day.

It was ten years since he had had an English Christmas.

He and Madge were to have spent it at the Manor, with Billy and Lady Valeria.

Now, Madge and Billy would spend it together; he and Lady Valeria would spend it alone; he with the wide world opening in desolation before him; she, narrowed down to the compass of the six-foot grave of which the bishop's widow had spoken.

This was his punishment and hers, for the sin of self-sufficiency.

The two who had been faithful and unselfish, would at least have each other—and home.

As Rodney switched off his light, he remembered the quiet words of the blessing the bishop's widow had given him at parting: "God bless you, my dear boy, and lead you in the right way; and prepare you for whatever the future holds in store."

It helped to make the long hours of darkness less unendurable.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE BEACON LIGHT

RODNEY breakfasted early.

It was a radiant morning, clear and crisp. The sun rose in splendour, over the sea. It had not yet risen, behind the Harley Street chimneys.

He suddenly remembered the little black balls hanging from the plane-trees, against the wintry sky. How far removed he now seemed from the flat, and all appertaining thereto.

On his way out from breakfast, he passed the hotel telephone. He felt an impulse to ask for a trunk call to 494 Mayfair, and to clamour urgently to speak to the Matron or to Dr. Brown. Jake would say: "If it's the bloomin' 'orspital you want——"

At the post office they handed him two letters, both redirected, from Regent House, in neat prim writing, probably the careful calligraphy of

the excellent little Sarah Mimms. One was the long official envelope he was expecting. The other——

The other! Oh, heavens! How does a shipwrecked sailor, clinging frozen to a spar, believing himself in mid-ocean, feel, when the fog lifts suddenly, and he sees, just ahead, the harbour lights—the lamps of home?

Rodney had not seen that handwriting for ten long years; but he knew it instantly.

He dashed back to the hotel, up the stairs, into his bedroom; locked the door, and flung himself into an armchair.

The other letter was from Madge!

He tore it open.

It was dated December the 21st, and written from the Manor House.

"My Dear Rodney,

"I feel sure you will by now have seen in the papers, news of the dreadful thing which has happened here.

"It is trying for you, as indeed for each of us, that poor Valeria's death should have followed so quickly upon the painful scene we had with her at the flat.

"But Billy and I are most anxious that you

should know, at once, that you are not in the slightest degree to blame in the matter; and that Valeria's sad death was not in any way connected with that which had gone before.

"She had completely recovered from any mortification she may have experienced, and had been laughing over it, before the car drew up at the door.

"Billy saw her pass into the hall, with a smile of enjoyment at sight of the great log fire. She walked toward it with hands outstretched, and was evidently tripped up by the tiger skin.

"Afterwards, her mind was completely taken up with a fear lest her hands should be permanently scarred. She gave no further thought to you or me, or *The Great Divide*. She flew to the sleeping draughts, in order to ease her pain; and took the overdose while in an already dazed condition.

"Of course poor Billy is inclined to reproach himself bitterly for not having sat up with her; but she had ordered him out of the room, and he left her in charge of her maid.

"It is all hopelessly sad.

"Billy's eyes had been opened, during the run down from town, to Valeria's selfish disregard of his feelings, and utter lack of love for him. She

had told him, in so many words, that she had married him, simply for the sake of all he could give her.

"In this, you and I do perhaps come in, as having unintentionally brought about a more complete unmasking of poor Valeria than we could have contemplated. In her vexation with Billy over the matter of *The Great Divide* she appears to have thrown prudence to the winds, and indulged in an hour of complete self-revelation.

"In the light of subsequent events, one cannot but feel this to be a blessing in disguise. There is always a strength and safety in truth, however unpalatable at the moment, or hard to face.

"I believe Billy will come through this fierce fire of disillusion, purged and strengthened. His four months of married life with Valeria will be but an episode. When he recovers from the bewildering torture of her self-revelation, and from the shock of her subsequent death, he will take up life again—older, and wiser, but, I trust, not embittered. Everybody loves Billy. The atmosphere of sympathetic affection with which he will find himself surrounded, must help. This one mistake will not be allowed to spoil his whole life.

"Meanwhile, he seems inclined to shut up house here, and go abroad for a year. He said last night:

'If Rod is off again soon, perhaps he will let me go with him.' I said I felt sure you would.

"I tell you this to show how absolutely free Billy's honest mind is from attaching any sort of unjust blame to you, in connection with the tragedy. All might have happened exactly as it did, had Valeria merely been returning from a day's shopping in town. Death, when it intervenes is apt to make us take a morbid view; but vain regret over the mistakes of the Dead, should never be allowed to cause us to become unjust toward the Living.

"Rodney, you will understand, I feel sure, the intense sadness through which we are passing here.

"My heart goes out, in a passion of pity, to poor Valeria. She lies upstairs, more lovely, in death, than she ever appeared in life. Billy has covered her with white flowers. Her poor bandaged hands are hidden. I long to be able to fold them upon her breast. She would have felt the picture so incomplete, without her hands carefully in view. It seems so pathetic that she cannot be here to enjoy the sight of her own loveliness.

"Perhaps you hardly saw enough of her to realise it, but Valeria always moved in pictures. She saw herself always as a picturesque figure in

a suitable setting. Other people were just the background. I shall never forget her, on her wedding-day. Every movement, look, and attitude, had been carefully studied and rehearsed. It imparted an extraordinary feeling of unreality to the whole ceremony. I came away with an absurd idea that Billy and all the rest of us had been mere puppets in a show; playing up, rather inadequately, to Valeria as 'leading lady.'

"Oh, this looks so unkind, put down in black and white! But I do not mean it unkindly, Rodney. I think you will understand. I am afraid Billy and I still feel like puppets, and Valeria is not here to pull the strings. It wrings my heart, to see Billy doing and ordering all sorts of things quite foreign to his own tastes and ideas, simply because he knows Valeria would have wished them in the setting.

"The funeral is to be to-morrow; so, mercifully, the whole thing will be over before Christmas. We could not stand many more hours of this strain.

"Billy came in just now, with a very white face, bringing two casts of Valeria's hands which had been found in a drawer in her boudoir. He asked me what he should do with them. I took them from him, without a word, went straight upstairs,

and put them into her coffin. They will be buried with her. Don't you think I was right? I wish it were possible also to bury all the harm those poor little hands have wrought.

"Now I must bring this rather lengthy epistle to an end.

"I am sure you will understand that my sole motive in writing, is to save you from any pain of needless self-reproach, and to assure you that Billy and I attach no blame to you in connection with the tragedy which has overtaken us.

"MADGE."

P.S.—"I have not tried to find out your address. I hear you left it with Jake. I am sending this to him to forward. Don't leave England without remembering our poor old Billy's wish to go with you. He could be ready any day. He would leave all business affairs, in my hands."

Rodney stood up, folded the letter, and walked over to the window.

The sunshine sparkled gaily on the ripples of the sea.

"Madge," he said, "oh, Madge—Madge!"

The world just then seemed to hold nothing save her name.

How completely she had understood. How loyal and kind had been her endeavour to save him from pain.

How utterly free from all thought of self, was every line of her letter.

As he stood there, he mentally lifted those fine, capable hands to his lips, kissed them reverently, then held them against his breast.

He and Billy were to go off abroad. She was to stay, and manage all the difficult business Billy's affairs would involve; close the Manor, let the flat, deal with all complications; and then sit down alone again, to wait. For what? Billy's return?

Was this noble woman's life to be all made up of waiting?

Was there to be no fruition for the possibilities of her unselfish womanhood?

He looked the letter through, again; eagerly searching for some sign, some indication, between the lines, that he still held a place in Madge's plan of life.

But no. Madge was not one who wrote between the lines.

He was to go abroad—that she seemed to take for granted; and Billy, if possible, was to go with him.

He himself had shut the door; but the kind, firm hand within, had put up the chain.

She obviously acquiesced in his decision.

Had he any choice but to abide by it?

He must take Billy abroad, and thus do his best for Madge, in this unforeseen crisis.

He went out and walked along the path at the edge of the towering cliff, feeling strangely happy and at rest. He was going to put others first, for once, in his life's ordering. He was beating back and forcing into silence the insistent clamour of a strong new desire, which had first awakened within him when his separation from Madge seemed to have become irrevocable—a thing no longer under his own control. He could not deny that it had awakened; but he refused to recognise it, think of it, or call it by its name.

He crossed the golf-links, and arrived at a little village which had been a favourite resort of his in bygone years.

An old church, which he remembered as a picturesque ivy-covered ruin, was in process of being beautifully restored. He entered the churchyard, and examined the work with interest, and with an appreciation born of a knowledge of

architecture which enabled him to understand the reverent skill brought to bear upon the elaborate and difficult work.

At the west door a box had been placed, for any chance contributions toward the work of restoration and reconstruction. Above this box, hung a beautiful little painting of the old ruin as it used to be—ivy-covered, useless, desolate; standing out, jagged, roofless, against a purple sky. Illuminated in letters of gold upon the sky, were these lines:

The ruins of my soul repair,
And make my heart a house of prayer.

There was a rare touch in the painting of that picture. The artist had contrived to produce, not only a correct representation of the ruin, but also a vivid sense of uselessness and desolation. The powerful portrayal of that fact, alone, seemed incentive enough to induce the passer-by to help on the noble work of restoration. But the gold lettering, against the purple sky, went even deeper than the picture.

Rodney found himself repeating the lines—then realised that he had, all unconsciously-uttered them aloud:

The ruins of my soul repair,
And make my heart a house of prayer.

He took a five-pound note from his pocket-book, folded it, and slipped it into the box.

Then he walked on, toward the distant cliff.

CHAPTER XXXV

HOUSE AND HOME

ON the very outskirts of the village, Rodney came upon a picturesque old cottage. Its tiny garden was enclosed by a low wall of grey flints.

As Steele approached, the door opened and a woman came out from beneath the rustic porch. She wore a lilac print gown, and drew a woollen cross-over about her shoulders, as she stepped into the frosty air. She carried a plate, and scattered crumbs upon the little plot of grass. Then she stood for a moment near the wall, watching the sparkle of the sunshine on the sea.

A robin, waiting in an apple-tree, flew down at once and began to pick up the crumbs at her feet.

There was a trim neatness about the woman, which pleased Rodney. She made a pretty picture, in her lilac gown, against the background of the

white-washed cottage. The glow of a fire, came from within.

Rodney stood still, lest the sound of his tread should frighten the robin, or scare away a rapidly-increasing crowd of other hungry little birds.

The robin flew back into the old apple-tree, and burst into a gay little opening trill of song.

The woman looked up and smiled.

"Ah, Bobby," she said; "you shall have cheese to-morrow, for a treat on Christmas Day!"

"Bravo!" said Rodney, from the other side of the wall. "I am glad you approve of giving cheese to hungry little birds."

At sound of his voice the woman turned, gave a cry, and clasped her hands together, dropping the plate, which fell on the path and broke into several pieces.

Rodney lifted his hat.

"Too bad!" he said. "I am very sorry. I startled you. You must allow me to replace the broken plate."

But she hurried to the wall, both hands outstretched.

"You!" she said: "you! And only this morning I was praying that I might see you again some day!"

Rodney looked into the thin, eager face, uplifted to his.

It was the "frayed widow."

He leaned over the wall, and took her trembling hands in his.

"What an extraordinary coincidence," he said. "Do you know I tramped Oxford Street, Regent Street, Baker Street, Piccadilly, Harley Street, Wimpole Street, Bond Street—every imaginable street, road, and square, around the original corner where we met, in search of you? And here I find you, quite by chance, on the Norfolk coast. Wonderful!"

"Why did you search for me, sir," she said; "you, who had already given me all?"

"Because," said Rodney, "I was anxious to understand how a sovereign could mean 'house and home,' and to make sure that it meant it permanently. I argued the point, endlessly, with the bishop's widow. She said it probably meant overdue rent for a lodging; but I felt certain 'home,' in the tone of voice you used, meant more than that." He looked past her at the cosy cottage—the glowing firelight within. "Did it mean this?" he asked, with sudden illumination.

"Indeed it did, sir," she said. "It meant getting back to my old father and mother, and

the home of my childhood. It meant getting where people knew me, and where I could easily find work. You see, your sovereign paid all I owed for lodging, and my railway fare from London, here. When my husband died, I was left absolutely penniless, without home or friends. Our bit of furniture had to be sold up, to pay his debts and funeral expenses. I did not know which way to turn. I was selling matches to keep myself in daily food, and in hopes of gradually saving enough to take me home. I could not ask my old parents for help, though I felt sure of a welcome, if I could only get to them. I was ashamed to beg. The one society to which I went and told my story, promised to 'investigate the case,' but I heard no more. Investigation, sir, is a long word and takes time. While the process is going on, we poor people starve, go under, and disappear. This simplifies the investigation.

"Then you came by, sir, and placed the very sum I needed in my hand. I paid what I owed for my lodging, and took the first train home the next morning. Already I feel as if I had never been away. I am earning enough to keep myself, and to help them. I'm made caretaker to that big house yonder, which stands empty all winter.

I have needlework to do for those who knew me as a girl. And I owe it all to you. Night and morning I pray that God may reward you; and he will. May I make so bold as to ask you into our little home, sir? It is cold, standing out here; and my mother will wish to thank you."

Rodney followed the trim figure up the path. He liked this new edition of the frayed widow.

In the cottage an old couple sat, one on either side of the fire-place; the man bent, rugged and weather-worn, with keen, humorous eyes, peering out from beneath shaggy eyebrows; a cheerful smile, a hearty voice, and a ready wink; the woman, small and frail, inclined to overflow with tearful gratitude; divided between tremulous gratification at Rodney's presence, and a nervous anxiety as to what old Dad would say next.

Between them the daughter, taking a loving pride in both, and doing the honours of her humble home, with that complete absence of self-consciousness, which constitutes, in any walk of life, the principal charm of a hostess.

Rodney soon found himself partaking of a steaming hot cup of cocoa and a plate of freshly-cut bread-and-butter. The very last thing he desired at that hour was cocoa; but there was

that in the face of the woman in the lilac gown as she offered it, which caused him to accept with alacrity, and to put away the remembrance of his very substantial and recent breakfast, as he worked steadily through the plate of bread-and-butter.

Meanwhile, he was listening to the pathetic story of the adventures of his frayed widow, told, somewhat disjointedly, from three different points of view; old Dad's—though decidedly the most racy and to the point—being hushed and kept in check, as much as possible, by his wife and daughter.

Polly had been in service, up at the big house, ever since she left school—so smart, and pretty, and highly thought of—this from the mother, turning eagerly to Steele, and refusing to see Polly's shake of the head. The lilac print she now wore was a survival of those days of service, laid up in lavender, against her return.

"Not lavender," corrected old Dad. "You bet it was Keating's. You always put Keating's in my Sunday clo', mother. I'll take my davy, it was Keating's."

Rodney smiled. He knew so well the kind of mind which remembers its Keating's as lavender;

and the mind which thinks of other people's lavender as Keating's.

Polly had waited on Royalty up at the house — even old Dad's ready wink was held in check, in order to watch the effect upon Steele of this evidence of Polly's grandeur; while she — by a slight deprecatory gesture, intimated that she did not expect him to be overwhelmed by the fact that Royalty, in common with ordinary mortals, required hot water, and that it had been her duty to supply it.

Polly could have married whom she pleased; plenty of young men in the village were after her; in fact, she was by way of walking out with Will the carpenter—quite heart-broken, poor chap, by what happened, but now set up on his own, highly respectable and still unmarried—when a "shover fellow" came along, and ousted Will, and all Polly's other suitors.

Rodney wondered who this pushing person could be, until old Dad threw light upon his profession, by a spicy tirade against motor-cars.

Old Dad was great on prophecy, and immensely elated at having discovered a prophetic description of motors in the book of Nahum. He stubbornly refused to be silenced, until Polly had

found the passage in the large family Bible and read it to Steele.

"That's it!" said old Dad, gleefully. "That's a good one, for them as says the Bible ain't abreast of modern discoveries! 'You just read Nahum ii. 4,' says I, 'B.C. 713! "The chariots shall rage in the streets, they shall justle one against another in the broad ways: they shall seem like torches, they shall run like the lightnings!" ' And then, in the next verse, all the poor folk getting out of the way. How does it go, Polly? . . . Ay, that's it, 'They shall stumble in their walk; they shall make haste to the wall.' But the next chapter puts it clear that we can't all get out o' the way of them 'jumping chariots' —there's a fine name for 'em! You just read Nahum iii. 3, my girl. No, wait a bit. I've got it! 'There is a multitude of slain, and a great number of carcases.' I'd like to know what that means, if it don't apply to these darn'd motors!"

"Oh, hush, father!" said Polly, hastily closing the family Bible, and replacing the antimacassar.

"Pr'aps the gentleman owns a motor, Dad," suggested the little old woman, with a tremulous glance of apology in Steele's direction.

"Not he!" said old Dad, stoutly, "or he wouldn't ha' bin walking in the streets, with a sovereign in his pocket to spare for our poor lass in her need. He'd 'a bin in his 'jumping chariot,' and, like as not, knocked her down at the street corner, and left her dead among her match-boxes. 'There is none end of their corpses,' says the prophet."

"Oh, do be quiet, father," pleaded the daughter, looking anxiously at their visitor. But Rodney's hearty laugh, relieved her fear of giving offence.

He produced his tobacco-pouch, the old man's pipe was filled; he became busy and silent, and the story proceeded.

The "shover" laid siege to Polly's heart. Faithful Will, the carpenter, was no longer in the running. "Women are silly creatures,"—old Dad removed his pipe to explain this, winking knowingly at Rodney. "They prefer a showy ne'er-do-well, to any amount of honest worth."

The little old woman did not hush down this statement. She nodded and smiled, looking at Steele with shy pride. She knew herself to be the one shining exception, in this respect, to the general rule. Had she not had the sense to realise old Dad's honest worth, half a century ago?

The daughter bit her lip, and looked out of the window. The carpenter's workshop could be seen in the distance. Faithful Will was building himself a house close by.

The family for whom the "showy shover" shoved, returned to London. He persuaded poor foolish Polly to throw up her place at the House —the place where she occasionally waited upon Royalty—and to follow him to London.

They were married at a registry office. "Not much blessing on that," remarked old Dad, and glanced toward the family Bible. He had a pet verse about registry offices; but for the moment it had escaped him, and Polly was gazing firmly out of the window.

This was five years ago.

At first Polly wrote often, and her letters sounded as if she were happier than she had any right to expect to be. Then they grew few, and far between; and at last they ceased altogether.

Then faithful Will went up to London to find out how things were going with Polly. He came back with a sad tale. The "shover" had taken to drink, and lost his place. He had become a taxi driver, and lost his license. Then he had done scene-shifting, for a while; but he stuck to nothing for long. He had ceased to be "showy,"

and had become dissolute. Polly had grown thin and worn; and her little boy was ill. They lived in two rooms, and Polly took in needlework to keep herself and her little boy in food, and her husband in drink.

Faithful Will sent her money; but Polly returned it. She would have died of starvation, sooner than take money from Will.

Her little boy died. She changed her lodgings, leaving no address, and they lost sight of her altogether, until a week ago; when a tap came at the door, and, the mother opening it, there stood Polly, the shadow of her former self, worn, pale, trembling, alone in the world, and said: "Mother and Dad, I've come home. May I come in?"

The little mother wept freely, at this point.

Old Dad bit hard into the stem of his pipe, and winked at Rodney. But he winked because his keen old eyes had, also, filled with tears.

"We soon had her in and by the fire," he said, with an attempt at a chuckle, "and I can tell ye, she hadn't sat in the old chair many minutes before we'd heard all about the gentleman who had given a sovereign for a box o' matches, and 'Blessed are the merciful,' says I, 'for they shall obtain mercy.' "

The quiet woman in the lilac gown, turned her soft eyes upon Rodney.

"You know now, sir," she said, "why it meant house and home. My former master and mistress have been so kind. They sent for me at once, and found me this post of caretaker to a house belonging to friends of theirs. I have charge of beautiful things, and keep the rooms aired and fresh. My lady also gives me needlework, and whenever they want extra help, I am to go up to the House. It seems like old times to be back there. Everything seems like old times, except" —her eyes sought the window again—"except one's self," she added, very low. "One can't *feel* again, as one felt before; one can't *be* again as one was before."

Presently Rodney stood up, and took his leave.

He shook hands warmly with the old couple, promising old Dad a pound of this particular tobacco, and declaring that if he ever bought a "jumping chariot" he should arrive in it, to take them out for a run.

"You could then verify Nahum in every detail," said Rodney. "If you were in the car, you would love to see the people running to the wall."

The old woman wept again, and her tremulous blessings followed him to the door.

The daughter slipped on a cloak, and walked beside him down the garden path.

"Mary," said Steele—he could not say "Polly" to a person who had carried up hot water to Royalty! Yet he wanted to call this sweet-faced woman by her name—"Mary, how about faithful Will?"

Her brightness was clouded instantly, by a sad perplexity.

"He comes round of an evening," she said. "He is very good. He is—just that: faithful Will. I know what he feels, and I know what he hopes. But——"

"But what?" asked Rodney, kindly, his eyes upon the troubled face.

"Well, sir, Will is quite unchanged. He has hardly grown older. He has lived on here, and worked and waited, and been wonderfully good to father and mother. But you see, sir, the trouble is that I have changed. I made a great mistake and had to suffer for it. I know life, and I know sorrow. I buried my little boy; and I have faced starvation, times without number. Five years ago, I was younger than Will. Now I am far, far older. I can't seem able to go back

and give him the love I gave him as a girl, long years ago."

"Of course you can't," said Rodney, eagerly. "You can do better than that for faithful Will, Mary. He deserves more than a young and thoughtless love, as recompense for these long years of waiting. You must fall in love with Will afresh. You must give him the mature love of the woman who has lived and suffered—the woman who knows and who understands."

She stood in the sunlight, holding open the little gate.

"Must I?" she said. A pretty flush tinted her pale cheeks. "Can I?" she asked.

"Of course you can," said Rodney. "Don't let the one mistake spoil his life and yours. Providence has given you another chance. Take it, Mary."

She looked toward the house the honest carpenter was building.

"I thank you for your advice, sir," she said.

"It means 'house and home' again, Mary."

She smiled. "Perhaps it does, sir."

"Let me know, when the matter is settled," he said. "This address will always find me.

When you fix the day, Mary, if I am not on the other side of the world, I should like to attend your wedding."

Again she smiled, and her sweet eyes were wistful. She no longer looked the shadow of her former self. The bloom of womanhood was returning, in the peaceful atmosphere of love and home.

She stood with his card in her hand, the sunlight in her eyes, and fresh hope in her heart. Had she really still something to give, worth offering to faithful Will?

Rodney bade her good-bye, and walked on up the cliff.

The song of the robin in the apple-tree followed him.

Who would have believed that one sovereign could be so important a factor in the lives of four people?

The thought gave him a new sense of responsibility as he remembered his large balance, lying at the bank.

"Your heavenly Father feedeth them." Mary, in her poverty, had said that she gave her crumbs to the little birds because she liked to have a share, however humble, in God's work.

Rodney began dimly to apprehend this truth, in its wider aspect.

He strode on, mounting rapidly, and whistling as he walked.

And, suddenly, he found himself in the Garden of Sleep.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN THE GARDEN OF SLEEP

RODNEY stood among the quiet graves, and looked around him.

He was in Poppy-land; and, strangely enough, although it was Christmas-eve, one tiny poppy bloomed at his feet—a small splash of scarlet in the frosty grass. He picked it, and put it in his buttonhole.

Many years before, he had visited the Garden of Sleep, lying solemn and peaceful at the summit of the wind-swept cliff. When the ancient church had had to be taken down and moved inland, the tower was left untouched, standing alone on the edge of the cliff—a landmark to ships at sea.

It now stood so near the edge, that any day it might fall over and disappear.

The great cliffs were constantly slipping into the sea. Looking back, Rodney could see, all along the coast, how they had gone, in giant bites, huge masses at a time.

It was impossible now to walk round the tower.

He went inside; and, looking up, noted the cracks in its walls which made it evident that soon this sacred sentinel, keeping guard over the quiet graves, would fall with a mighty crash and disappear.

He stepped out; and, half-way down the shelving precipice below him, he saw a human bone.

Then he realised that the Garden of Sleep was itself slipping into the sea. Many of the graves, and the bones they contained, had gone already. Laid to rest in the quiet earth centuries ago, they now found themselves swept away into the ocean.

Well, it matters little to the Dead from whence they rise. "The sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and the grave delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works." What would matter then would be, how they had lived; not where they had rested after death.

Rodney looked away from that lonely human bone, covered for the moment neither by earth nor sea, and let his eyes dwell upon the moving, sparkling waters far below him.

Then he turned to see what was left of the Garden of Sleep.

The tombstones he remembered as standing up

against the sky, had been moved a few yards inland, and reverently laid, by careful hands, flat upon the grass.

Rodney walked among them, reading the names, dates, and inscriptions.

His attention was drawn to one, by the lengthy poetic effusion carved upon it.

It had formerly covered the grave of a "much respected farmer," who had "departed this life" at a ripe age, nearly a century before.

By his express desire, a text had been inscribed upon his tombstone, setting forth that he was "chief of sinners"; but his family had hastened to follow this up by sixteen lines of poetic panegyric explaining that he had, in reality, been chief of saints.

Rodney read the lines through, beginning:

Pause, stranger, pause! Fix here thy wandering eyes——
Beneath this stone a bright example lies.

and, as he read, his "wandering eyes" were full of a keen, yet not unkindly, humour.

He seemed able to reconstruct that family, and to see so clearly the respected old farmer at the head of his table, depreciating himself with une-

tuous humility; well aware that, at once, his admiring family would take the cue, and play up to his self-disparagement, with anxious and expostulatory praise. And, even after death, they did not fail him. When he insisted on recording himself upon his tombstone "chief of sinners," they replied with:

He, who his faculties so meekly bore,
He told his failures, not his virtues o'er.
While still so humbly of himself he deem'd,
In his own eyes, the chief of sinners seem'd.
What, though so well he filled his long career,
That rich and poor met mourning o'er his bier.
And o'er his grave both might with reverence bend,
Who shone as neighbour, husband, father, friend.

Rodney, as a student of human nature, had often come across that insistent humility which holds as much of egoism as does self-praise. And here he found it, echoing from a past century, in the quiet wind-swept grass of the Garden of Sleep.

A whimsical smile was on his lips, as he turned from the tombstone of the respected farmer. Certainly the old man had been safe in leaving his final word of self-depreciation in the hands

of his family. It was firmly recorded, in imperishable stone, that they did not fail him.

With rapid transition of thought, Rodney's mind went back to the small, pallid schoolboy, seasick and forlorn, met at Charing Cross by his adoring little mother; blossoming at once, in the atmosphere of her admiration, into a jaunty traveller, undaunted by the ocean.

Ah, it is good to have somebody who believes in you! There are few who fail to live up to the standard set by appreciation and praise.

Close at hand lay another tombstone, bearing a very short inscription.

Rodney stood at the foot to read it.

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
DENNIS BLYTHE,
WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE
MAY 11TH, 1856,
AGED 73.
"READER!"
"PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD!"

After the name, date, and age, just these two lines—nothing more.

At first Rodney stood and considered them, as the student of human nature.

Again he could reconstruct from this simple inscription the old man whose honest heart had ceased to beat more than half a century before.

Always a preacher, his great desire was to give one final, arresting message to each passer-by who should pause beside his grave.

Rodney could picture him as a fine, fearless old fellow of one idea, who would probably astonish a chance fellow-traveller, seated beside him on the coach on the road from London to Norwich, by saying, suddenly: "Young man, are you bound for heaven?" or "Friend, how is it with your soul?" disarming offence by the intense earnestness of his desire for the welfare of the stranger he thus accosted.

When at last he lay upon his dying-bed, facing the fact that his opportunities for earthly service were over, Rodney could fancy his joy as he thought of this plan! A final clear message should be writ plain upon his tombstone, a warning, an exhortation, to all who paused to read what was written thereon.

So it came to pass that—beyond the fact of his name, and age, and date of death—there was nothing about old Dennis Blythe, upon that stone; save for those who could read between the lines, and recognise the burning, deathless zeal of the

evangelist, in that final appeal, cut deep into the stone:

"READER!"
"PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD!"

Rodney preferred old Dennis Blythe, in his rugged, selfless simplicity, to the much respected farmer, who was "a bright example." Also he saw in the two inscriptions a curious instance of the futility of egotism, and of the abiding, enduring power of a selfless thought for others. Both graves had long ago subsided with the slipping of the cliff. The stones had been moved from the edge, and laid flat upon the simple grass. The one still pompously proclaimed: "Beneath this stone a bright example lies!" long after the bright example had been swept out to sea. The other made so little mention of the man who at first had lain beneath it that, though the bones of old Dennis Blythe had also found permanent rest far below in the ocean, his tombstone still spoke its simple, arresting message, with equal appropriateness and power.

"The bishop's widow would base a neat little preachment on that," thought Rodney. "Self-contemplation, whether humble or otherwise, is proved inadequate—in this case, absurdly so.

Thought—of and for others—holds the elements of lasting power."

He wondered idly, how many people had read those words, since 1856. Constant visitors troop up, in summer, to view the Garden of Sleep. Probably old Dennis's "Readers" by now amounted to thousands.

Then—suddenly—the inspired Word did that which It—and It alone—can do. It gripped Rodney, and brought him face to face with realities, past, present, and future, in his own inner life.

In one clear flash of revelation he saw that those words held for him the essential thing which had, up to now, been wanting in his scheme of life: "Prepare—to meet—thy God."

He stood, bareheaded, facing the conviction brought about by this silent message from the Dead, searching and strong in its living power.

His life, during the last ten years, had been void of all preparation for the future—of preparation of any kind.

After the blow of losing Madge had shattered his whole prospect of settled happiness, he had lived from day to day in the present; he had travelled far, worked strenuously, grasped at success and attained it. But of the calm of soul,

the steadfast mental outlook which meant preparation, there had been none. Work, strive, succeed, then work again, had been his one idea.

He met each foe with a swift drawing of the sword. He leapt over each barrier, as he reached it.

He buried the past and ignored the future. Nothing counted but the present; and, in that, nobody counted save himself.

"Prepare to meet thy God."

Preparation was optional; but was the meeting inevitable?

And whom or what was this God he must prepare to meet?

In working out his book on Egypt, Rodney had made a study of the ancient names of deities. He knew that the Hebrew word here, was probably that which signifies "an object of worship." What object of worship was there in his life? What did he put first?

Self? When launched into the Unknown, would he come face to face with the Self of which he was already sick? Was this to be his hell?

Success? When fame and fortune and the opinions of his fellows were all left behind, would he find himself alone with the empty husk of a past success, in a life he had left for ever?

"And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in Thee."

Is this God, whom old Dennis Blythe calls upon him to prepare to meet, the Maestro for whom his life's tempestuous orchestra is waiting?

What had Madge said about a measure of three almighty beats?

At once the bishop's motto came into his mind; the three words his gentle mother used to draw, that her little boy might paint them, stood out clearly as the answer to all vague and restless questionings: "God is Love."

He put on his hat, thrust his hands into his coat-pockets, and walked up and down, to and fro, in the quiet Garden of Sleep.

Reviewing the past ten years of his life, he realised them empty and barren; barren because they had held no supreme love—either human or divine. Then, all unexpectedly, the rich gift of a woman's perfect love had been offered him; but he had not been prepared to meet it. He had been taken unawares. The demon voice of Self had cried, to the greatest human gift which could step forth to meet a man on the lonely shore of life: "What have I to do with thee? I beseech thee, torment me not!"

"God is Love"—"Love is of God." The

human and the divine seemed to him strangely one, in this hour of self-revelation. In cutting himself adrift from the one, during all these years, he had found himself unprepared to meet the other.

The sin of self-sufficiency had proved his undoing. Was he permanently undone?

He pulled up short at the edge of the cliff, beside the old ruined tower.

The ruins of my soul repair;
And make my heart a house of prayer.

Back into his mind came the gentle words of the bishop's widow: "God bless you, my dear boy, and lead you in the right way, and prepare you for whatever the future holds in store."

If reparation was still possible, surely preparation was possible also?

Then and there, on the wind-swept cliff, regeneration came to Rodney—regeneration of will, of purpose, of heart, and of life.

"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth."

He could not explain the process; but he knew that, in this quiet Garden of Sleep, his soul had awakened; his life's orchestra was now hushed and

ready; no longer trumpeting its own random snatches of unfinished music, but prepared to respond obedient to the beat of the Maestro.

Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all the chords with might;
Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, pass'd in music out of sight.

Rodney turned, and stood once more at the foot of old Dennis Blythe's grave-stone.

He smiled as he remembered Madge's words: "It is not what you do to the texts, Rodney; it is what the texts do to you."

What else had Madge said? Something about the Maestro. Ah! "I do not know how He will deal with the cornet; but He will have to silence the beat of that kettle-drum in your life's orchestra, if there is to be harmony in its music."

His first test arose—gaunt, and fierce, and cruel —a spectre from the past, among those quiet graves.

For the moment, it took him by the throat. Its gripping fingers were the ten long years during which Madge, thinking him false, had belonged to another.

Then he grappled with it, shook it off, and—

standing bareheaded, one foot upon old Dennis Blythe's tombstone—took his first step along the path of preparation.

"I forgive the woman who came between us," he said, aloud. "My God, I forgive her—as I hope to be forgiven."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE "TRÄUMEREI"

THE robin was still singing in the apple-tree, as Rodney strode past the low wall.

Polly had picked up the fragments of the broken plate. All the crumbs were gone.

A little further on, he passed the carpenter's shop.

Through the window he could see a man planing a board. He glanced up, as Rodney went by—a ruddy face, honest blue eyes, thick curly hair, and a brown beard. Faithful Will, without a doubt, working at house and home for Polly.

Providence had given her another chance. Would she take it?

Rodney looked at his watch. He had just time, if he walked quickly, to get back to the hotel, pack his bag, pay his bill, and catch an express up to town.

What his next move would be, he did not know; but, for the moment, he must get back to the flat.

Madge would be away, spending Christmas with Billy; but, after Christmas was over, she might return.

Anyway, he would wait for Madge, where Madge had waited for him.

He caught the express: even finding time, on his way to the station, to look in at a grocer's and order a hamper of good things to be sent up immediately to the cottage on the cliff, where his frayed widow would be spending such a thankful Christmas. "A sort of fatted calf," thought Rodney, as he chose a fine York ham. "And put in a good bit of cheese," he said to the man who served him, remembering the promise to Bobby in the apple-tree. "Half a Stilton? Yes, that will do."

London was enveloped in a heavy mantle of yellow fog. It hung lower and more thick, than on the afternoon of his arrival by the boat train.

When at last he reached the entrance to Regent House, the upper windows were invisible. No little hands tapped on the pane, in eager expectation; no children's faces were pressed against the glass. The atmosphere of welcome was wanting.

Yet the hall of Billy's flat looked cheerful and wonderfully homelike, when Jake opened the door, and Rodney entered.

He was seated in a deep armchair beside the library fire, that evening, when the distant chimes rang out the hour of nine. He was alone—yet not lonely; thinking deeply, earnestly—yet not brooding. He was pondering over his own life, reviewing past mistakes; considering the possibility of retrieving those mistakes, in the future.

The process of preparation, once begun, went forward rapidly.

He had advised Mary, as they stood in the little cottage garden on the cliff, to take the second chance given her by Providence, and by the fidelity of another heart.

He himself was also ready to take another chance; but the question was: would Madge give it him? Everything to him in life, humanly speaking, now depended upon that.

Delivered at last from the warped vision of a self-centred point of view, it seemed to Rodney that his behaviour to Madge had put him outside the pale of her tenderness, beyond the reach even of her faithful and understanding love.

First, he had deliberately refused the great gift she offered him.

Then, yielding unworthily to the overmastering attraction of her loveliness, to the remembrance of a past possession which he had scouted as a present fact, he had insulted her, and shamed himself, by a violent exhibition of passion; taking unworthy advantage of her complete trust in him.

Here—in this very room—after giving her to understand that he had no best to offer her, he had forcibly taken that to which he had no right unless his whole life's devotion lay at her feet.

He shuddered now, as he remembered Madge's stillness and silence, and the stricken look upon her face, as she left the room.

She had forgiven him. She had pitied and understood. But could love survive so great a blow; and could he face life—this new life of infinite possibilities—if he had irrevocably lost Madge's love?

He realised now, with a depth of shame and self-abasement, that he had never meant to lose it. His pride had made him hold aloof. His petty annoyance over the telephone episode, had kept him from an immediate surrender to his insistent need of her.

To satisfy this selfish desire to hold the reins, choose his own time, and prove himself master of his life and hers, he had walked out, leaving her shamed, humiliated, and confronted by the impossible situation of having offered to the man who had admitted that he still loved her, more of herself than he was prepared to accept.

In punishing her for her innocent deception of him, he had also punished himself; yet he had enjoyed the pain he thus ruthlessly inflicted, knowing—yes, knowing all the time—that eventually he would return.

Not until it had seemed to him that Lady Valeria, by her sudden death, had irrevocably closed the door, did he realise how much this certainty of eventual return meant to him.

Then a great despair had seized him, for the bishop's widow had indeed been right. His former love for Madge had been as nothing to the love he now felt for Lady Hilary. He had fallen in love with Madge as a woman, more deeply and completely than he had ever been in love with her as a girl.

It had required long hours of facing the flaming sword which turned every way, barring his passage back to her, to make clear to him

his own desperate need of the woman whom he, in his dogged pride, had imagined he could live without.

The phantom of vain regret had marched beside him, throughout the bleak and stormy hours of yesterday.

All night it had gazed at him with grim relentless face; and ever at the gate of Paradise, flashed through the dark, the flaming sword.

Then, with the morn, came sunshine, blue sky, bright ripples on the sea, and—Madge's letter. And lo, the flaming sword was safely sheathed in the bosom of her tenderness.

Wait! Dare he call it that? Was it not rather, her kindness, her consideration for him, prompted by her fine sense of justice which would not allow undeserved reproach to fall, even upon one who had forfeited all right to her consideration?

In common with most strong souls in the throes of conviction, Rodney was inclined, during this hard time of retrospection, to be unjust to himself. He forgot his honest doubt as to whether he could offer to Lady Hilary a love worthy of her acceptance. He forgot his fear lest having lived his own life for so long, with none to consult or to consider, he should

find it impossible to put her first; he forgot his firm determination not to offer her a second best, if he had no best to offer. In the reaction of this hour of self-revelation, his own conduct seemed to him to have been altogether selfish and unworthy.

He took out Lady Hilary's letter, and read it through again.

It had brought him, at first, complete and unspeakable comfort in the fact that Lady Valeria's death did not lie at his door; that Madge and Billy both held him free of all blame in that respect.

But after this first rush of immense relief was over, the chill certainly took hold of him, that the friendliness of this kind and generous letter held no promise of love, contained no sign that she awaited his return, or even wanted him back.

Was not this plan, that he should take Billy abroad, a clear indication that she expected him to go, and would be best pleased by his absence?

He turned to the end of the letter.

"I am sure you will understand," wrote Lady Hilary, "that my sole motive in writing, is to save you from any pain of needless self-reproach,

and to assure you that Billy and I attach no blame to you in connection with the tragedy which has overtaken us."

"Us"—"Billy and I."

The words seemed to range the brother and sister, together, on one side; and Rodney, alone, on the other. The Great Divide lay between. Not the book—so inadequate and mistaken in its poor attempt to record a tragedy of human love—but the true parting of the ways, brought about by the fact of a self-centred and unprepared heart.

He folded the letter.

She was his no longer. She had avoided even the most formal "Yours," by signing herself simply "Madge."

Rodney sat forward, his elbows on his knees, and dropped his head into his hands.

"I cannot live without her," he said.

A sense of unutterable loneliness fell upon him.

The distant chimes sounded the hour of ten.

"And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in Thee."

"I *will* live without her," said Rodney, "if this is now her choice, and best for her. I will have strength to play the man. I will take old Billy abroad, and give him a real good time. In

doing this, I shall serve her best. God give me 'courage and gaiety.'"

Sitting lonely there, he felt again like Valentine in *The Great Divide;* but the beast which the bishop's widow had said died hardest, lay dead at his feet: Self was slain.

He was unspeakably lonely; yet a vague peace filled his soul.

Then, softly through the wall, came stealing the tender theme of the "Träumerei."

Bewildered, amazed, Rodney listened; hardly realising at first that it meant that she was there, so close to him.

Each note seemed to carry its message, vibrant, with memories of the past; appealing, with possibilities of the present; trembling, with hope of the future.

First came the simple gladness of unquestioned possession, in which two hearts mount high upon the wings of mutual love and trust.

Then, the same theme changed to a minor key, and wailed forth the sadness of disappointment and disillusion.

But, by and by, it passed again into the major, and rose triumphant; love and trust overcoming all pain of separation and of doubt.

Finally—in the calm of exceeding rest—came the three closing notes; and these notes sent one insistent message through the wall, to the straining ears of the lonely listener:

"Are—you—there?"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"ARE YOU THERE?"

RODNEY STEELE rose to his feet, walked through the hall to the telephone, rang up, and asked for Lady Hilary's number.

Listening, breathless in the silence, he heard her take up the receiver.

"Madge," he whispered. "Madge! Are you there?"

"Yes, Rodney. I am here."

"Madge! I can't live without you!"

"Oh, Roddie, have you found that out?"

"Found it out? I should think I have! I want you more than any man ever wanted any woman before."

"Roddie, I really can't quite bear hearing this through the telephone. Come to me, darling; come your own self and find me here."

"Can you really give me another chance, Madge? Isn't it too late? I have been such a blind, senseless brute."

"Of course it is not too late, dear. Does love ever say 'too late'? Come round and see."

"Madge, I can't live without you!"

"Roddie, I absolutely refuse to hear that again through the telephone. Oh, you foolish old boy! Don't keep us both waiting."

"Madge, I——"

"Roddie, I am going to ring off!"

Rodney hung up the receiver.

He walked slowly down the stairs, as in a bewildered dream of wonderment.

"Prepare to meet——"

He was prepared; and yet he felt unready to meet such love—such bliss.

The door of Lady Hilary's flat stood open.

Rodney passed in, closing it behind him.

The drawing-room door had also been put ajar.

He entered, shut the door, and stood for a moment behind the screen.

Suddenly it became almost impossibly hard to him to walk the full length of that room, to where Madge would sit waiting for him in her chair beside the fire, as once before she had done, when he so cruelly failed and disappointed her.

He felt ashamed. He felt horribly unworthy.

Miles of carpet seemed to lie between himself

and Lady Hilary. How could he cross it, with her calm, steadfast eyes upon him?

Would he ever reach her?

And when he reached her, what could he say?

But the woman who loved Rodney, and who knew him so well, had risen, and moved swiftly down the room, when she heard him close the door.

As, stepping from behind the screen, he passed into the soft, golden light, her arms were round him. Her love had leapt the Great Divide. There was no need for words.

CHAPTER XXXIX

ON THE SAME SIDE OF THE WALL

AN hour later, Madge said:

"My darling, you must go! I can't keep you here until midnight. But I will wait in this room until the clock strikes; and you can ring me up, and wish me a happy Christmas, on our dear telephone."

"Oh, bother the telephone!" said Rodney. "And bother, still more, the wall! I say, Madge? Can't we get an extra special license, and be married to-morrow?"

"Certainly not! Only costermongers and their girls get married on Christmas Day. You would have to come in 'pearlies.'"

"I'd joyfully wear pearlies, or anything else, to get my girl."

"A little waiting will not hurt you, Roddie. It shall not be very long. Perhaps—on New Year's Eve. Would you like to begin the New Year together?"

"Would I like! Promise, Madge."

"Yes, dear. I promise."

"We will be married at Marylebone Church," announced Rodney. "The Jakes can be witnesses. I suppose we mustn't ask poor old Billy. The Bishop can give you away."

"The Bishop! What bishop?"

"There is but one Bishop. Mrs. Bellamy will be his proxy. She will tell us, so exactly, all that he would have thought, and said, and done, that we shall feel as if he has really done it."

Madge smiled.

"I believe that dear loving old heart helped you, Rodney."

"Of course she did," said Rodney. "Widows are most helpful people. They all helped me. Even my frayed widow did her share. She had such a wonderful way of saying 'house and home.'"

"I wonder whether you will like my little home at Haslemere."

"Where you grow the lilies for the buttonholes? Of course I shall. But I shall check the inventory, and reduce it to one buttonhole."

"Don't be silly, darling. I haven't the faintest notion where that man got his lilies. It was a pure coincidence that I happened to be wearing mine that night."

"Then he wasn't on the buttonhole inventory?"

"Rodney, shall we go down to Haslemere on our wedding-day?"

"No," he said. "Unless you specially wish it. I should like to see the Old Year out, and the New Year in, here—on whichever side of the wall you like; but here—where we have each been so lonely; here—with no wall between."

Tender amusement was in her eyes.

"Very well, my Pyramus!

'Thus have I, Wall, my part discharged so;
And being done, the wall away doth go.'

And then?"

"Then to Haslemere, Madge; or anywhere you will."

"I should love a week at Haslemere. But after that, Roddie, I should like you to take me to Egypt. Since reading *The Desert Sentinel*, I have longed to know Egypt, as you know it."

Rodney glowed with pleasure.

Then a sudden thought sobered him.

"How about Billy?" he said.

"Billy is at Overdene. I heard from him this morning. His special chum, Ronald Ingram, is there also. There seems to be some idea of their

going off abroad, together. Of course, if he likes, Billy can join us later. But not at first, Roddie. Not just yet."

She sent him away at last.

It was not easy.

CHAPTER XL

THE CHANT OF THE PURPLE HILLS

RODNEY waited, in the hall of Billy's flat, for the call of the telephone. Madge was to ring him up, for a final good-night.

He heard the midnight chimes. A sense of the Herald Angels was in the air. It was Christmas Day.

He was so happy, that he could scarcely face his happiness, sum it up, or comprehend it.

The old chant of Bethlehem's purple hills seemed to voice it best: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men!"

Certainly there was glory in his soul, deep peace in his heart, and a sense of good-will toward all.

He was glad the beat of the kettle-drums had been silenced, before this great anthem of praise began.

It would have been easy to forgive that poor

soul, now; for the joy of which she had robbed him, was not a joy such as this.

But he had reached the point of forgiving her, while still uncertain as to what the future held.

He was glad of this. It added to the harmony of his soul's orchestra, now that, at the bidding of the maestro, it was rendering the Bethlehem theme of glory, peace, and good-will.

The telephone-bell rang.

Rodney took up the receiver.

"Hullo?"

"Is this 494 Mayfair?"

It was the Kind Voice!

"Yes," said Rodney.

"Can I speak to the Matron, or Dr. Brown?"

Rodney grinned, delightedly.

"I am afraid you can't," he said. "The Matron and Dr. Brown are going to get married to-day—Christmas Day, you know—and Dr. Brown is out just now, ordering his pearlies."

"Dear me, how interesting!" said the Kind Voice.

Then he heard Madge laugh.

"Oh, Roddie! Are they as happy as we are?"

"Dr. Brown is not," said Rodney, emphatically. "I can't answer for the Matron."

"Let's go to the wedding."

"I decline to attend any weddings, until I come to yours."

"Darling, don't be so peremptory! Of course you shall come to mine. I will send you an invitation, and a buttonhole of lilies of the valley."

"Madge?"

"Yes?"

"I have something to say to you which can't be said over the telephone. May I come round again, for one minute?"

"No, you may not. You have already said so much over the telephone; I think it can stand the strain of one thing more. What is it?"

"I wish you a happy Christmas."

"Is that all?"

"No, there's lots more."

"I understand. Come to breakfast in the morning. I will give you my Christmas greeting then."

"Madge? This time next week, we shall have done with the wall of partition; and done with the telephone. I shall say all I want to say, then! Shan't I?"

"Good-night, Roddie."

"Good-night, Madge."

He heard her hang up the receiver.

He waited for one moment, listening in silence.

Then, with a smile of complete content, Rodney rang off.

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